



THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"BACHELORS' BUTTONS"

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THE
BEWILDERED
BENEDICT

Kale Burns
Manila
June 8. / 18.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

BACHELORS' BUTTONS

The Candid Confessions of a Shy
Bachelor. *Ninth Thousand.*

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"A New Humorist."—DUNDEE ADVERTISER.

THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

THE STORY OF A
SUPERFLUOUS UNCLE

BY
EDWARD
BURKE

"Unbidden guests are often
welcomest when they are gone."
—SHAKESPEARE.

TORONTO: BELL & COCKBURN
LONDON: HERBERT JENKINS LD.



THE WESSEX PRESS, TAUNTON, ENG.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
I. CONCERNS RELATIONS IN GENERAL AND ONE IN PARTICULAR	I
II. SOPHONISBA'S UNCLE	II
III. A FAMILY MEETING	28
IV. A VISIT OF INSPECTION	48
V. TWO POINTS OF VIEW	64
VI. ANGUS WILL NOT ADMIRE	68
VII. SOME UNFORTUNATE INCIDENTS	81
VIII. ENDEAVOURS TO SPEED THE PARTING GUEST	92
IX. HOW RICHES TAKE TO THEMSELVES WINGS	99
X. PANSY AS EVICTOR	110
XI. MISHAPS TO AN UNCLE	120
XII. I AM HELD RESPONSIBLE	138
XIII. ANGUS HAS A BRILLIANT IDEA	160
XIV. THE DISAPPOINTMENTS OF A HONEYMOON	183
XV. SHOPPING ON A HONEYMOON	195
XVI. THE THIRD IN THE HONEYMOON	206
XVII. ANGUS IS RETICENT	217
XVIII. THE ATTITUDE OF SOPHONISBA'S UNCLE IS CONSOLING	235

	PAGE
XIX. A YET MORE UNWELCOME GUEST .	241
XX. I AM GOADED INTO INTRODUCING MY OWN VISITOR	249
XXI. A VISIT TO THE DENTIST . . .	262
XXII. A FRIEND FROM THE ESPLANADE HOTEL	268
XXIII. MRS. HARRIP HELPS ME TO BEAR MY LOT	279
XXIV. A SECRET INTERMENT BY NIGHT .	299
XXV. A HARVEST OF "GOOD IMPRESSIONS"	312
XXVI. SOME STARTLING EVENTS . . .	331
XXVII. SOME MORE SURPRISES . . .	352
XXVIII. ONCE MORE WE RELY UPON ANGUS .	369

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CHAPTER I

CONCERNS RELATIONS IN GENERAL, AND ONE IN PARTICULAR

SOPHONISBA looked at the signature, read a few lines, and banged down the letter in disgust.

“Why, I thought he was dead!” she exclaimed indignantly, and added: “How like a relation!”

“Who isn’t dead?” I asked.

“Oh, only an uncle——” She picked up the letter gingerly.

I was astonished, for her father had told me distinctly that his brother was dead. He had been a saint and a martyr, and perished somewhere abroad. I knew no more than this, for I had not cared to inquire into what was obviously a painful matter.

“You see, you never mention your relations, dear,” I observed.

“One prefers not to,” she returned.

Now the vice of curiosity seized me. I wanted to know all about this mysterious uncle who was dead, and yet not dead.

“I understand he went into the interior and was swallowed up?” I ventured.

2 THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

Sophonisba looked at me oddly, and choked over her coffee. "You've hit it exactly!" she spluttered; "but that was Uncle Abimelech. One expects things to happen to people called Abimelech. Thank goodness Edward the Second and Billium won't want to be clergymen an' missionaries an' things!"

"Then your Uncle Abimelech was a missionary? He converted the heathen?"

"Dunno about convertin'," returned Sophonisba in a matter-of-fact tone; "they ate him before he'd time to get started—— If you don't want that last slice of bacon I believe I could manage it."

"How dreadful!" I gasped, helping her to the bacon.

"Why?" she asked, astonished, and added philosophically, "If people go about askin' for trouble they mostly get it. Leave the heathen alone an' he'll leave you alone; that's sense, isn't it? Besides, you can't expect to keep your relations for always, an' it can't be helped, anyway, so one may as well make the best of it. Then he used to give us prayer-books on our birthdays, an' read us 'passages,' an' said the heathen abroad were nothin' to the heathen at home——meanin' us kids. He was the most disappointin' relation we ever had, which is sayin' somethin'! I expect he disappointed the heathen too——there wasn't much on him. This egg seems all white."

"Still——" I began.

"As long as things don't happen to you, why fuss?" asked Sophonisba, cracking another egg. "As long as we're happy, what's the odds?"

She beamed at me, and I beamed back again. Everybody knows that my lovely young wife and I are ideally happy.

"Relations mostly deserve it," she went on. "It

CONCERNS RELATIONS IN GENERAL 3

isn't the missionary uncle that's written, thank goodness, it's the one that was such a corker in his youth."

"A corker?"

Sophonisba has a delightful and unique language of her own.

"A regular clergyman's son," she explained; "there was simply nothin' he didn't do—that he shouldn't have, I mean. Couldn't leave money or cheques or decent lookin' servants about. He forged, cheated at cards an' got found out, and bagged some of the church funds, then——" she lowered her voice. "Are the boys listenin'? Well, then he ran away with the gardener's wife, a woman with goggle eyes—that's the sort he was. An' now after thirty years, an' us thinkin' him dead, he has the cheek to write to me, who was a wee kid when he did a flit."

She paused to help herself to some marmalade.

"How did he discover I was married?" she went on. "I tell you what it is, he's found out I've got a rich husband, an' he's goin' to try an' rob us and run off with our servants—just as we've got so well settled with them, too, an' Jane a perfect treasure. He's heard somehow what a ridiculous kind old thing you are, and thinks to do us down for all he's worth. Well, he hasn't struck it as lucky as he thinks! He can go back to where he came from—prison, for all I know or care. It wouldn't be the first time, though thank goodness he mostly did the things under an alibi——"

"Alias?" I suggested.

"Well, it's the same thing. Anyway, he can go back again, quick march! Have such an example in the house with the boys! Drink, as well as other things. I shall not even know such a vile person! 'My dear Niece Soapy,' indeed! What next!"

4 THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

She took up the letter to see what next, and became absorbed. "Why, he's actually started," she exclaimed. "Now I call that really friendly of him! Such a nice companion for you an' all. He'll be here in a few hours. Really, it's positively too sweet of him for words! I hope he will make quite a long stay!"

"But," I began, startled, "a man of such reputation——"

"Darlin', don't be fussy an' old-maidish because the poor dear was a little high-spirited in his youth, and got blamed for simply everythin'. After all, boys will be boys, specially when they're brought up religiously. He's been all over the world an' made millions, an' isn't married. Was there ever anythin' so providential? An' to let us have first go, with relations all scrappin' to have him in the sickenin' way they do go on when there's money an' pickin's! If the poor dear had returned a beggar do you think they would have welcomed him, overlooked the past? Catch 'em at it—that's all!"

"But, my darling girl——"

"Of course he's repented an' all that," she interrupted hastily; "one does when one gets on in the world an' elderly an' that. Besides, he was well brought up. We must make his declinin' years happy, poor old man. Won't the relations look silly when the will is read? Of course it's all for the girls. We don't want anythin', thank goodness!"

Sophonisba, the most unworldly of mortals, is continually worrying over the impecunious position of her family. If only she would allow me to become responsible! . . . but she says a man's responsibilities are those of his own household.

"I will see to the girls——" I began.

CONCERNS RELATIONS IN GENERAL 5

“You would see to everybody an’ everythin’ if I would let you,” she returned, “an’ I should be in rags before you’d finished, an’ the boys in charity asylums. No, Edward, charity begins, an’ ends, at home. Poverty is worse than a habit, it becomes second nature and a regular vice in no time. Uncle can see to all that. We will make him ever so happy, then he will die an’ leave all his money to the girls, an’ they will get married at last, poor things.” She spoke as if the matter was settled.

“I’m sure——” I began.

“You are such an optimist, always believin’ in human nature, an’ everythin’ bein’ for the best an’ all that, but it doesn’t work. One has to keep one’s eyes skinned in this world, or dear old human nature gets the better of you.”

“How can I believe in anything but the best when I have you, Sophonisba?”

“I’m not much,” she returned gruffly, “but you’re a blind optimist, thank goodness. If only the poor pater—but you know what clergymen are, no money or anythin’, an’ how they leave people fixed when things happen.”

“Your father is an active, healthy man, in his prime——”

“Oh, the pater is just the sort of man to go an’ do it suddenly,” she said, exasperated. “If you’d lived in the house with him as the poor mater has to you’d know no more inconvenient sort of man was ever invented. I sometimes wonder why he *was* invented,” she added.

I gasped. There are still times when Sophonisba takes my breath away, though we have been married many happy years.

“You know I am always delighted to welcome

6 THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

any relation of yours," I said. "Very pleasant, I'm sure, having relations coming and going."

"More pleasant havin' 'em goin'," retorted Sophonisba; "specially when it's great-aunt Susans an' sister-in-law Pansys, an' they won't!"

I coloured. Perhaps Pansy, my brother James' wife, most excellent and sensible woman as she is, is rather a crumpled rose-leaf in my life. She can never forget that she brought me up, and more or less owned me, old bachelor that I was, up to some forty years, when my peerless and wonderful Sophonisba rescued me from the dragon—if I may use such a metaphor—and brought me incredible happiness.

"It sounds most inhospitable," I owned, "but I am always glad when they go, and you and I are left alone. They wrest you away, Sophonisba, as if they were doing me a favour."

"Oh, they think it a true kindness an' a relief," she said, smiling; "they can't believe you are the dear blind thing you are. I can't always believe it myself. I must own it's the only time I am really fond of relations—when they wave 'good-bye' out of the train."

I laughed.

"You see," she said in her dear, inconsequent way, "not feelin' properly married makes it so much nicer. If we'd gone on a honeymoon like other people you'd have come back a regular husband, an' everythin' would have been different. As it is I never think of you as a husband at all. I just think of you as the dearest man in the world I happen to be livin' with. It may be improper, but it's nice. Promise you'll never become a regular husband. I couldn't bear it."

I promised.

"We don't want his millions," she went on, returning to her uncle, "but the girls do. There aren't

any men for them to marry here, but there would be the minute they became heiresses. Things happen like that. Take Billium's fingers out of the jam, an' stop Edward the Second—he's goin' for another egg! The creatures now!—always doin' what they shouldn't, so comfortin' after the poor pater an' Uncle Abimelech always doin' things they should, an' becomin' missionaries an' things!" She beamed at our boys with maternal pride and affection, as well she might. Having such a mother they could hardly escape being as remarkable for mental and moral powers as for physical beauty and strength. Sometimes I am ashamed to think that, having two such wonderful sons, I have yet hankered after a daughter who should be her mother over again. Sophonisba only wanted boys, and, as was right and proper, got what she wanted, though her explanation puzzled me. "It doesn't matter what a boy looks like," she said, "even if they take after me; but a girl—— she'd never get married. I am the exception that proves the rule."

"What rule?" I asked, for I could not follow her meaning.

"That miracles still happen," she returned.

"Uncle Percy will wonder how I did it," she now observed.

"Did what?"

"Not only got a husband, but a rich one and a dear. People always laugh. Sometimes they say, 'Oh, well it's dogged as done it.'"

"Laugh at you marrying me?" I asked with a sigh, for I am a regular old fogey, years older than my fair young wife.

"No, at—well, what does it matter what they laugh at? They laugh best who laugh last, and we can do that all right! There isn't a happier, more devoted

couple in the world. Oh dear, Edward the Second has emptied the honey-jar on to his plate! What spirit the child has!" She took the honey away however and rapped our eldest son's knuckles. She has confessed to me that her one horror is, not that our boys shall grow up to be wastrels, but that they shall take after her father, grandfather, and Uncle Abimelech, and "be too good to be nice," as she expresses it. I do not think there is much danger.

"Of course they might take after Uncle Percy," she now observed thoughtfully. "I mean, of course, after he's repented and become a millionaire."

"I prefer that they should take after you, dearest," I said firmly.

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," was all she said.

Sophonisba undervalues herself to an absurd extent. One would think she was neither beautiful, clever, nor accomplished, to hear her.

"And then there's your training," I said. "How can they help growing up remarkable?"

"It's wonderful what people do help," she said.

Her training is as original as herself, and I feel sure it is bound to answer. She believes in "making the punishment fit the crime," and really it does seem rather effective. When Edward the Second was discovered stealing strawberry-jam, Sophonisba did not take the great jar away from him. Far from it. She stood over him till he had eaten the lot. The unhappy child was exceedingly ill, and will not look at strawberry-jam to this day.

Then there was the incident of Billium and the cat. Billium, in attempting to pluck the cat, did not, I feel sure, understand that the cat was not finding the pastime equally amusing, but he understood something

of the cat's feelings and the meaning of pain when Sophonisba plucked half a dozen hairs out of his head.

My sister-in-law Pansy, indeed all our relations, consider Sophonisba's method of training her boys brutal and disgraceful. I absolutely approve, but I usually prefer to go out for a walk till she has quite finished making an example. My mother-in-law, meeting me running down the road with my fingers in my ears, says she cannot understand however she came to have such a daughter, and invariably adds, "But then Scapy was always the odd man out."

"We like relations c-c-comin' an' g-g-goin'," announced Edward the Second, who stammers slightly.

"That's the right and hospitable spirit," said I heartily.

"'Cos when they comes, an' when they goes, they 'tributes to our money-boxes," explained Billium.

Billium does not stammer, he drawls.

They at once clamoured to be allowed to meet their Great-uncle Percy at the station. Sophonisba said they might, but added warningly,

"Now mind you don't do things."

They seemed surprised and hurt at the idea, and we set out gaily to meet the train. We were almost at the station when I was distressed to discover they had brought their money-boxes with them.

Sophonisba just said, "Oh, bother!" and took them away. She did not seem to think it odd that she should greet a rich uncle she had not seen since her babyhood with a couple of money-boxes under her arm. I hoped he would not notice, but thought it only right I should offer to relieve her of the burden.

"I will take one," I said, firmly if faintly. I wondered unhappily what he would think when niece met him with one money-box and nephew-in-law with

another. "Couldn't we leave them in the hedge and fetch them afterwards?" I asked, struck by a brilliant idea.

But the boys were not struck by it, and Sophonisba said,

"Oh, Edward, why fuss about money-boxes?"

"They will rattle so," I complained. "Of course you and I know it's only trouser buttons, but he won't, and it seems so frightfully suggestive." I knew that it was meant to be suggestive. The boys saw to it that their boxes rattled realistically while spending the contents as soon as procured. They both ate their cake and had it.

"We can t-t-take them when we get to the s-s-station," said Edward the Second consolingly.

"You must see they do nothin' of the sort," said Sophonisba to me.

"But mine has *All contributions thankfully received*," I sighed.

"Well, mine has *Blessed are the Liberal*," returned Sophonisba, and added, "He'll never notice in all the fuss of arrivin' an' crowds of luggage an' things."

I could only hope for the best. The irregular but distinct red letters were the work of Edward the Second, but it was Billium who had looked the spelling out in the dictionary.

And it was in this guise we went to meet Sophonisba's uncle.

CHAPTER II

SOPHONISBA'S UNCLE

WE were almost there, when our dog, who had been strictly forbidden to accompany us, tore up, wagging his tail. He always wags his tail, but he wags it specially hard when he does those things he should not, and hardest of all when he knows he badly deserves a whipping and thinks he is going to get it. It's an apology and a suggestion that you shouldn't all in one ; where I am concerned it is not ineffective.

“ Bad dog, go home at once ! ” I commanded.

He danced round me barking with delight. The station is one of the forbidden pleasures he enjoys whenever possible. He is never allowed to go, because, when once there, he loses his head and proceeds to get under and into every possible train. If he has a stronger fancy for one train than another, it is for the one that goes to the hub of the universe. He seems to think that there is no place for a gay dog like London, and it won't be his fault if he does not arrive there sooner or later. He answers to the name of “ Satan ” (I should like to explain that he was christened before I had him) when he feels inclined to answer at all, which is not always. He is often busy with affairs of his own and can't be bothered with interruptions. He is the most hospitable of dogs and loves visitors. Sophonisba said he would be sure to get attached to

her uncle almost at once. He has been with us more years than I care to count, seeing, that for a dog, life is so short, and ought really to be middle-aged and sensible. Instead he is merely ridiculously young and happy, and perhaps it is the wiser philosophy.

Like his master he dislikes cats, against whom he wages deadly war, and is no respecter of persons or of social status. He will wag at a tramp, provided he is a pleasant merry tramp, and will growl at a duke, if he does not fancy the duke. He never bites anyone, but when he does, it is entirely that person's own fault, and because he is innately worthless and depraved, and Satan's unerring instinct has discovered the fact. To be bitten by Satan—if he ever did bite—is equivalent to losing one's reputation.

So he came with us because there was not time to drag him home, but owing to Satan and the money-boxes we arrived rather late at the station. The train indeed was in and had disgorged its Hill Land passengers.

The first thing we discovered on the platform was a bag. Literally it was Sophonisba who discovered it by falling over it. She was annoyed at her haste being so checked, and said as she straightened her hat, "*What a bag!*"

It certainly was the worse for wear.

"And it's labelled 'Hill Land,' " went on Sophonisba examining it with disgust, "nice sort of disgrace havin' a visitor comin' with a bag like that! Can it be somebody for the Biltons? They have such fearful people to stay."

It was a very ancient kitbag which sagged helplessly in the middle, bulged crudely in unexpected places, and had three almost obliterated initials.

"One looks like a W," said Sophonisba, "but I can't

waste time on disreputable bags. Do you see uncle ? ”

I had no idea what sort of a man to look for, and said so.

“ He was christened Parsifal,” explained Sophonisba, “ because his god-mother was romantic. Then, when she died without leavin’ him anythin’,—as they have a way of doin’,—it was changed to Percy. I suppose he’ll be old and tall and distinguished, have white hair an’ all that. Lets go down there. The first person surrounded by porters an’ luggage will be him.”

However it wasn’t, and the person addressed said so with some asperity, and I felt shy of addressing anyone else. Sophonisba would not take any steps in the matter, “ I can’t go fallin’ on the necks of strange men an’ kissin’ ’em,” she said, “ suppose it wasn’t uncle. He might be annoyed.”

“ Not so annoyed as I should be,” I returned fondly, knowing how far from annoyed anyone so honoured would be.

Then a funny little fat man bustled up to Sophonisba, and took off his hat and began to say something, and Sophonisba told him with considerable heat that there was some mistake ; that she neither knew him nor wished to.

And he gave a high shrill laugh and said :

“ My dear niece Soapy, and not know her poor old uncle ! Why I knew her at once from her likeness to poor dear William. And this is my new nephew of course—the boys are his very image ! ” And he turned and grabbed the astonished hand of an open-mouthed young man who “ isn’t quite,” as we put it delicately hereabouts.

Sophonisba went her lovely pink, I gasped, and the young man fiercely denied being Sophonisba’s husband,

or anybody's husband, and tried to strike Sophonisba's uncle.

The situation was more or less relieved by violent rattling, and I realised that the boys had somehow or other retrieved their money-boxes, and were holding them rather conspicuously under their new relative's nose.

"Where are the p-p-pots, Uncle P-P-Percy?" stammered Edward the Second looking disappointedly round.

"Or did you bring it in sacks?" drawled Billium.

"Bring what?" demanded Percy Kearness."

"The m-m-money," explained Edward the Second anxiously, "m-m-mother said you had p-p-pots of it, Uncle P-P-Percy."

Billium rattled his box, but he said nothing.

"So I have," said the millionaire, "but I don't travel with it. As a matter of fact it's rather a mania of mine to travel as light as possible. Still, I may be worth a few shillings." He plunged his hand into his pocket, and with some difficulty extracted two shillings. The boys were his friends for life.

"Do they always bring their money-boxes to meet their relations?" enquired Percy Kearness.

"Oh no," said Sophonisba very hastily, "it was just because they did not think it safe to leave them at home. Edward—this is my husband, Uncle."

"Is it? Well I'm—I'm delighted." I think he was astonished that Sophonisba should have chosen a man so many years her senior. "An' Soapy married and the others left on the perch. Well it's a rum world, a rum world, but we must see what a dowry will do to remove their maiden blame."

Sophonisba gave me a gratified look which said

almost as plainly as words, "There ! What did I tell you !"

Sophonisba's uncle was a stout, bland, little man with a very thin laugh, and prominent light eyes. Indeed so light were they that they seemed devoid of pupil as of expression. They were eyes that hid emotions rather than revealed them. He had altogether rather a bleached look, possibly he had been much in hot climates, though it was darkness rather than light that he made me think of. In some odd fashion he reminded me of sea-kale, that vegetable we rear in the dark. Sophonisba's uncle looked as if he had lived in the dark. He was considerably shorter than I, though I am far from tall, and his clothes fitted him very closely. I never saw a man who looked less like dying.

Sophonisba sighed suddenly, and then said in a brisk tone, "What about the luggage ?"

Before he could answer, Satan changed his mind about going to London, dashed out of the train again, saw us talking to our guest, and came up and bit Sophonisba's uncle.

It made things very unpleasant for me. I said he,—Satan I mean,—did not mean it ; that it was only his high-spirits ; his playfulness ; that he had not noticed where he was going, what he was doing I meant ; that he was very absent-minded, but always meant everything for the best ; that he never bit people ; that whoever he bit, he would never dream of biting Sophonisba's uncle ; that his journey to London must have gone to his head owing to his being such a bad traveller——

"He is," joined in Sophonisba hurriedly, "do you know uncle we can never let him travel with his back to the engine—dear little fellow !"

But Sophonisba's uncle received our explanations rather coldly, and seemed to take quite a dislike to Satan. He insisted that I should make him walk in front, not behind. He said he hoped to God he wouldn't start having hydrophobia in our house, it would be such an unfortunate beginning, and Sophonisba said she hoped not too. She remarked that it would be such a bad example for the boys. They imitated simply everything, specially the sort of things they shouldn't, and added, "you *will* be careful won't you?" Then she returned hurriedly to the question of luggage. "Oh there's a bag somewhere or other," he answered shortly. "I did not bother to bring the usual cartload. I just flung a few things in the first bag I found handy and came straight on without any formality. There's my dear old friend," he pointed to the bag Sophonisba had fallen over, "been all over the world with me."

"Edward will tell the porter to bring it up," said Sophonisba avoiding my eyes.

"What's his third initial?" I asked idly for the sake of saying something, as he stopped behind to make some remark to the boys.

"Hasn't a third," said Sophonisba coldly, "don't be silly, Edward. Everybody knows millionaires are eccentric. It's a privilege they have."

"Of course," I owned readily. All the same it seemed an odd eccentricity to prefer other initials than one's own upon one's bag.

"It's only a step up," I said to my uncle-in-law, "but there's a cab if you'd rather?"

"Oh no, let me stretch my legs, a relief after chronic confinement—really yachts and motors are making pedestrianism quite a lost art." He gave his odd high laugh. There was not much mirth in it, and his eyes

never lightened in expression. It was just a frequent, and rather discordant sound, he had apparently got into the habit of making.

“Yachts and motors,” whispered Sophonisba to me, “what does a bag matter after all?”

“You will have to help me to amend my ways. Time eh! Ha, ha!”

“Your life must have been so interestin’, so full of variety,” murmured Sophonisba, “you must tell us all about it.”

“Variety is a mild word for it,” he owned, “what a charmin’ garden, and this is the house? Quite a nice little crib. Ever been cracked? Ha, ha!”

“What a sense of humour!” whispered Sophonisba to me.

“And whose this smart lady coming up the drive? Pretty gel, eh, you might introduce me.”

“That’s Jane,” I said rather awkwardly, and tried not to remember the gardener’s wife. Sophonisba, I could see, was also trying not to.

“And who is Jane when she’s at home?” he enquired.

“Jane who w-w-waits,” explained Edward the Second readily.

“Indeed! We don’t have such smart waitresses abroad I can tell you. Now-a-days it seems one can hardly tell maid from mistress, and perhaps maid would not always be flattered at being taken for mistress. Ha, ha!” And he continued to stare at the advancing Jane.

“Don’t you see, Edward,” whispered Sophonisba to me, “it’s only because he’s been accustomed to be waited on by men, perhaps niggers an’ things.”

Sophonisba as usual was right, for her uncle said something of the sort, “after my meals being shoved at

me anyhow by great brutes of—of clumsy footmen, it is a treat to think a skilful dainty maid will perform that function.”

The girl was now close to us, and prepared to turn off by the drive, which dividing into two, went, one portion to the front, the other to the back premises. Jane is as pretty as she is well-mannered and respectable. Her capacity for waiting amounts to genius. We have never had such a parlourmaid before, and Sophonisba says we never will again ; that we must do everything we can think of to retain Jane.

So, as the girl was passing us quite close, I asked her if she had had a pleasant afternoon, knowing she had been to some much looked-forward-to function, but forgetting the nature of it. Her reply enlightened me.

“ Oh sir I had a lovely time,” she cried, her eyes shining, and added with a thrill of triumph, “ I sat next to the brother of the corpse.”

“ Lucky fellar, corpse or not corpse,” murmured Sophonisba’s uncle gallantly, and the girl passed on blushing, but not ill-pleased, I think.

I hurriedly pointed to a distant back-view engaged in digging, “ And that’s Angus,” I said with pride.

“ Your gardener ? ”

“ Oh no,” I exclaimed shocked at the suggestion, “ the man who gardens. A gardener does what he likes, Angus—”

“ Does the same,” added Sophonisba drily.

“ Only when it’s for the best,” I said, “ Angus is our faithful servant and friend. When things get worrying we go to Angus whatever they are, and he puts them right. He is a genius and Scotch.”

“ It was Angus who finally got rid of great-aunt Susan,” explained Sophonisba.

"Aunt Susan! Don't tell me the old girl is still alive! Lord how I used to try and dodge her!"

"She is very much alive," lamented Sophonisba, "and we still try to dodge her—and fail. She invited herself here, and took a great fancy to Edward and wouldn't go. So we got Angus to see to it. I don't mean we mentioned it exactly, we never do that, only Angus knows things without mentionin'. And she left."

Sophonisba's uncle looked hard at Angus' back, "indeed," he said.

"Oh it was all very tactful," said Sophonisba, "Angus just went to her with his face in a beastly mess an' asked her if ammonia was any good for small-pox, and she took him up wrong and lit out for the station, leavin' her luggage to be sent on, an' then Angus got the ammonia an' cleaned his face, and said he was sorry the poor old lady had 'mistook' him, as he was afraid she wouldn't care to come here again, an' she never has."

It seemed to me that Sophonisba's uncle hardly appreciated Angus' tactics, "then if I am to remain I must propitiate the powers that be?" he asked laughing.

"Oh, but you are different," said Sophonisba quickly, "I hope you will stay for ages, but she stayed six weeks, and would hardly let Edward and me speak to each other. She seemed to think it improper to leave us alone, and you see Dorothea, Angus' wife, who is a sort of genius too, sees to the household so that I have no household worries, and can be a companion to Edward an' the boys, an' mess round in the garden an' things. Life's awfully jolly at Moss-end."

"I'm sure it is," he agreed.

"I'll tell Angus to come, and perhaps he'll favour

us with one of his funny stories," and I signed to the man who gardens.

He came at once, greeted me respectfully, and Sophonisba's uncle with the briefest and slightest of acknowledgements. Then he leaned on his spade and waited.

"You must work very hard to keep the garden in such beautiful order," said Sophonisba's uncle graciously.

Angus gave him a swift glance, "Dunno," he said laconically.

"Even in California the gardens fall short of this," went on Percy Kearness.

"Ump! California!" returned Angus, took up his spade, and fell to digging with increased violence.

I was disappointed. I could not feel Angus had done himself justice. I had almost to apologise for him, "Of course he *is* rather abrupt and laconic," I explained, "and perhaps a trifle insular. He objects to foreign places and to foreigners. Perhaps you noticed how he said California?"

"I did, but it doesn't matter. We all have our pet prejudices. Mine are ugly women and gratings. I don't know why, I'm sure."

He sank into the most comfortable drawing-room chair and drew off his smart light gloves, "Comfort at last for weary bones," he said, "try sitting on woods and planks for a change—as we have to do out West at times." Then he held out his hands towards us, and they were gnarled and horny with broken nails, the hand of one who had toiled early and late. Undoubtedly Sophonisba's uncle had worked hard for his millions.

"On and off, some twenty years' hard labour have gone to the making of them," he explained, laughing

almost violently, "not that it is a joke exactly—Klondyke!"

"You were there too?" asked Sophonisba, excited at mention of that magic place of gold.

"Find somewhere I havn't been if you can," he said wearily, "I'm a travel-tossed adventurer come home like a curse to roost at last. Funny game, life—eh what? Grind, grind, like a regular treadmill." He laughed again. "You start by thinking the world is going to be your football, and it's you that prove the ball, and don't always miss the goal, ha! ha! The thing is to kick back a little harder." His odd light eyes narrowed, and it occurred to me he had had a hard and bitter time of it building up his vast fortune.

Then he went up to his room to unpack, refusing to let either Sophonisba or me accompany him, and the dear girl turned to me and said:

"Perhaps not handsome, exactly, but there is a somethin'. I don't mean distinguished, but he has a great—great—" she sort for the right word, and concluded triumphantly, "personality."

"Is p-p-personality the p-p-polite word for—" began Edward the Second whose presence we had forgotten.

I hushed him hurriedly.

"I wish he'd mind his p's and q's," said Sophonisba with a sigh, "specially his p's, the child does stammer so."

"Oh, hardly stammer, Sophonisba," I hastened to assure her, "merely the slightest, most trifling, hesitation."

"He who hesitates is lost," she said gloomily, "then you are too late for everythin'. People who drawl and stammer can't keep up with the race of life."

"I like Uncle P-P-Percy," announced Edward Junior, "he's f-f-fat and f-f-funny."

"And gives us shilluns," added Billium slowly.

Percy Kearness came down in an old, but well-cut, dinner jacket, and I was gratified that a man who could afford the best of everything, should so heartily enjoy the fare we put before him, and be so appreciative of the swift movements of Jane.

"I never saw such an appetite," said Sophonisba afterwards to me, "I suppose it comes of goin' to Klondyke."

After dinner he seemed suddenly to forget our very existence. He muttered something about "exercise," and proceeded to pace the room,—or rather a small square of the room,—wheeling mechanically backwards and forwards. Suddenly he saw us looking at him, and sat down with a high shrill laugh, "there I go again," he exclaimed, and he seemed really annoyed with himself, "the most absent-minded beggar in the world! Hanged if I didn't fancy myself back on board my yacht in rough weather, having to make the most of my own private saloon. I'm very keen on exercise, taken it regularly for years. Fat runs in the family, you see, ha, ha!"

"Sophonisba," I said quickly, "is merely plump. I hate scraggy women."

"Well that's what I'm trying to avoid," he said, "getting plump."

"How did you find out about me?" asked Sophonisba, "we thought you were dead."

"Ah that's a queer story, fact is ever stranger than fiction. I had just made my second fortune,—I lost the first, you know,—and I happened to pick up a friend's newspaper, and saw it was the 'Hilltown Chronicle.' You bet I read it all through, the home

of my happy innocent boyhood and all that ! There was your wedding to the owner of Moss End, your photographs and all that, no end of a set-out. The more I looked at your picture, my dear Soapy, the prouder I felt of my niece. ‘It takes brains to do the trick,’ I said to myself, ‘and my little niece takes after her uncle, it seems.’ I resolved the very minute I had made my pile, I should turn up and share it, and see if little Soapy couldn’t help me to make the dibs fly. As luck would have it, my second fortune went the way of the first a few weeks later, and I had to start all over again, and postpone my visit for a year or so ! But I’m here all right now, and the fortune too, though I left that in charge of my secretary *pro tem*—not the chap that did a guy with the first lot, a brother of his. I simply couldn’t wait. England, home and beauty called me, and beauty never calls in vain where Percy Kearness is concerned.” He laughed long and loudly. “I seem to have struck the garden of Eden before the advent of the snake, and previous to the apple incident. Isn’t there a saying to the effect that once woman gave man the apple, but now she only gives him the pip ? ”

“Oh uncle how delicious ! ” cried Sophonisba, laughing as if she had not heard it before. It was one of Angus’ oldest stories.

“Some people find it dull without the snake,” mused Sophonisba’s uncle, “then they import him, and when trouble comes of it, blame the snake. So like human nature ! ”

“You are such a philosopher, uncle,” said Sophonisba admiringly.

“Well I try to be, my dear, I try to be, but I can’t say that I’ve always found it easy. The top dog has all the philosophy, you know ; the under-dog gets none.”

“There are two things I *must* know,” cried Sophonisba when we were alone together, “I shall burst if I don’t! How much is it, and how much will he settle on the girls, and—— and what about the gardener’s wife, Edward?”

I could offer no solution.

“He never mentions her, at least of course he wouldn’t do that, but I mean he talks as if there hadn’t been one. Perhaps there wasn’t really, people always think the worst. At anyrate she will be sure to be dead, so that doesn’t matter, an’ it can’t be helped anyway. Only her husband bein’ still in the neighbourhood makes it so tiresome. You know what those sort of people are—so fussy and curious. He’s been askin’ questions about her already.”

“Dear me,” I said startled.

“Yes, he’s quite upset, and he said to Dorothea, who repeated it to me, that he ‘hoped to God he weren’t bringin’ of her back,’ and Dorothea said she would enquire and let him know. What had I better say?”

It seemed to me the least said the better, and I implied as much.

“Darlin’ you’re not bein’ a bit helpful. One has to say somethin’, if only to choke the absurd old thing off. I shall say she is dead,” she announced with decision, “then everybody will feel comfortable.”

In the middle of the night I was awakened by a piercing shriek coming from the direction of Sophonisba’s bed. I knew at once what had happened, and seizing the toothache tincture and the cotton-wool brought it to her side. The poor child has a most annoying sort of tooth. When she can’t possibly have the dentist to take it instantly out, such as in the middle of the night, and on Sundays, the thing gives her a most awful time. Then when I have persuaded

her to keep an appointment with the dentist, the tooth is all right, and she thinks it would be wiser to wait till next time, it being a pity to lose a tooth that may be quite sound all the time for all one knows, and useful as a grinder.

She was sitting up in bed rocking herself backwards and forwards, and I got the cotton-wool ready, "here you are, darling," I said.

She pushed my hand away, and told me rather shortly not to be silly : her teeth were good enough if they were only let alone.

"It's a simply frightful nightmare," she moaned, "and if I hadn't just woke up I should have died of shame. It's that beastly bag of uncle's. Oh why must he bring a thing like that, how can one explain it away ? I thought we were all at Lady Bown's garden-party dressed up to the nines, and that the king and queen were there, and we were talkin' to them as friendly as you like, gettin' on splendidly, me tellin' them about the garden an' Angus, an' the queen takin' such an interest in Edward the Second's stammer, an' advisin' me what to do for it, when suddenly uncle appeared with his awful bag, an' everybody stared an' giggled, an' the king said, 'is it a suffragette ?' an' looked annoyed, an' the queen said, 'an anarchist with a bomb,' an' looked at me, an' I tried to say I didn't know who it was or what it was, but that millionaires were always so eccentric, and I couldn't say a word, Edward. Fancy that now, not a word !"

"Dreadful," I agreed.

"But that wasn't the worst. He put down the bag in the very middle of us all, and simply dreadful things began to crawl out of it. First there was the gardener's wife. Oh Edward you can't imagine my feelin's. And Lord Bown looked at her through his eyeglass and

said, 'not a militant, I trust,' and uncle—oh Edward, uncle just looked at her through *his* eyeglass and said, 'Ha, ha—here we are again!' in such a vulgar way. I felt so ashamed, and did hope people wouldn't notice. Then crowds an' crowds of snakes came out, an' they all had uncle's face, and I tried to scream and scream, an' my tongue clove or whatever you call it, and I couldn't utter a sound. U-ugh!" She clutched me, shuddering violently.

"Dearie it's all over now, it was only a dream," I said soothingly.

"It was so realistic, I can't believe it was only a dream. And oh Edward that wasn't the worst. Who do you think came out of that frightful bag then, and tried to grab the uncle-snakes? Pansy. And—and oh Edward she was dressed like Eve, and she tried to make him swallow pips."

I laughed, I couldn't help it. I know nobody more rigidly respectable than my sister-in-law Pansy. "Impossible!" I cried.

"But she did, and I couldn't explain *that* away. I tried to remember the joke about the apple and the pip, but I got that all wrong, and the bishop came and looked down his awful nose at me. I thought I should have died. Then, the worst thing of all happened, who should crawl out of the bag but uncle himself, and how do you think *he* was dressed?"

I could only think of Adam, but did not care to venture the suggestion.

"You will never guess! In a frightful fancy-dress-thing, so unbecoming to his figure, an' all covered over with great broad red arrows, an' fancy my feelin's when the king turned to me, and said, oh, in such a haughty tone, 'since you are so good at explainin', Mrs. Delland, perhaps you will be good enough to

explain *that*,' an' pointed to uncle. And of course I couldn't, an' I just screamed an' screamed, an' thank goodness woke up to find myself yowlin' like anythin', but no garden-party or nothin' ! ”

“ I was afraid it was the tooth,” I said.

“ I'd rather have twenty teeth goin' on anyhow,” she declared vehemently, “ than one bag like that ! ”

CHAPTER III.

A FAMILY MEETING

THE next day I suggested that Uncle,—as he wished me to call him,—should accompany us to the vicarage on a call upon the brother and sister-in-law he had not seen for thirty years. I cannot say he hailed the suggestion very readily, but eventually he consented to come. As it began to rain just before we started, and it appeared that in his hurry to see us he had hardly packed anything, Sophonisba's uncle had my new expensive raincoat and my umbrella. I think Sophonisba, who had chosen the very latest thing on the market, was sorry that her uncle rather than I should be the one to christen it, so to speak. My old one is a very shabby affair indeed. Percy seemed very pleased with himself. He asked me to remind him to order one like it, and was kind enough to say that what was good enough for me was good enough for him. He also called me his dear nephew, and twice I remembered to call him uncle.

I told Satan to stay at home ; so he came too. I was rather astonished at this, for ever since the day he had followed me to church to get shut up during Mr. Kearness' sermon, he had, I regret to say, taken a most violent dislike to that reverend gentleman, and would not go within a mile of him if he could help it, and never down the road which led to the church. Therefore I could not make out why he insisted on

coming on this occasion, and hoped and prayed it had nothing to do with Mrs. Kearness' cherished cat, "Charles." I am always in a fuss lest one day "Satan" and "Charles" shall meet, and I get blamed.

Our uncle Percy took an arm of each of us, and told us some of his adventures. They were most extraordinary in every way, much stranger than fiction. I could not understand how any man could have passed through so much and be still alive. He said one got so accustomed to it as to think nothing of it. The road to the vicarage had never seemed so short.

"Did you tell 'em I was coming?" he asked suddenly.

We said we had.

He looked at us sharply, "and what did they say?"

We did not care to repeat what they had said, so I said they had expressed delight at the idea.

"Umph!" said Sophonisba's uncle. "Poor old William still got the same old Mary? Poor old Mary still got the same old William?"

I was rather taken aback at this bluff mode of expression, but Sophonisba giggled, and said they had.

Percy lit one of my cigars,—he was kind enough to approve of my cigars,—"rotten luck!" he said sympathetically, "Just shows you—civilisation has its curses as well as its blessings, prison, permanent-matrimony, the most pernicious kind, hypocrisy, morality instead of human nature, and the new detective system." He knit his brows, and seemed to brood over these matters long and darkly.

I hoped he would not talk like that before Mrs. Kearness. She is a most particular woman. My father-in-law is also most particular. Of course I quite understood how it was. Sophonisba's uncle had been

lost to civilisation for over twenty years,—he had told us so himself,—and things came upon him as new and strange. The views of the man of travel and adventure, one who has taken his life in his hand for years and all that sort of thing, are naturally wide and unconventional, while the views that obtain in the average vicarage are very much otherwise.

Sophonisba caught my perturbed eye and grinned. I don't think she minded as much as I. She is so sweet-tempered, so calm and kindly, that she takes as a matter of course things that are often rather disturbing to me. She took her parents entirely as a matter of course.

Uncle roused himself from his gloomy meditations. "For some thirty-five years poor Mary has had to put up with poor old William only, and it's too late to hope for a change now, though they say it is the nature of women to hope on for ever. She has produced five daughters, quite a criminal offence as matters are now, three of them still unmarried, and one not as young as she might be. She has to live on tuppence-halfpenny a year, in a potty little parish, and with William. Yet I suppose she calls it life just the same."

I was almost sorry we had persuaded him to come. Such a tone of conversation would hardly be welcome at the vicarage.

Sophonisba looked thoughtful, "I don't know about that," she said, "I've often thought she found it a rotten nuisance, but would not own it for worlds. After all she mightn't have got one at all. I suppose that would be almost worst—at least more of a disgrace. Things are very rum. She was a beauty and top of the class at school, and got the poor pater. I wasn't a beauty—exactly," she laughed at her own ridiculous misstatement, "an' bottom of the bottom

class, and I got Edward.” She gave me a look. “She had five daughters, one, a pretty bad hash of it, did turn out all right in the end owin’ to miracles an’ things, an’ a bit of helpin’ here an’ there, and I two sons. She’s tuppence-halfpenny which may cease any minute, the pater bein’ like that, an’ I’ve five thousand a year safe as houses, an’ the lovliest home! I suppose I must have been born under a lucky star, an’ the poor mater’s must have been a shootin’ one, an’ hurryin’ off on a journey or somethin’ when it should have been workin’ the influences for the mater. Anyway she got pretty well left, an’ I didn’t.”

“Possibly it was not all the stars, my dear,” said her uncle softly, “likely enough you under-rate your own abilities. Perspicuity, my child, goes further than book-learning any day.”

When people pay Sophonisba compliments she goes pink and looks angry.

She got pink and angry now. “Rot! I didn’t,” she said, and rather hastily changed the subject. “Doesn’t it feel odd comin’ back after all these years? Don’t memories crowd, an’ all that sort of thing? Don’t you want to recapture your lost youth like books talk of, an’ tosh like that?”

“Memories crowd! I should just think they do!” he returned, “The sacred memories of home, Sophonisba.”

“I know,” she said nodding her head, “too little jam an’ butter for tea, too much an’ too stale bread.”

He sighed, “That’s so. Oh memories that bless and burn! as a chap was singing to a monkey and an organ the day I came out—out of the Golden West——” he paused abruptly.

I was astonished to find Sophonisba’s uncle so poetical. He did not look that sort of person.

“ Here for instance is the very spot where I used to play marbles with poor old William and poor old Abimelech. I don’t know how it was,—for I wasn’t much of a shot,—but I always ended up with all the marbles. The financial spirit working even then, I suppose. I used to swop ’em for grub and things, and place them for fat old gentlemen to fall over. Ah, there’s nothing like happy healthy innocent youth ! And now I’ve still got the marbles, and the good little boys have got none ! Life again ! Never say there isn’t a moral to every story, my dear nephew-in-law. Well, here we are at the gate—the same old gate, with the same old mend in the middle. I did that,—I mean the part that had to be mended,—with poor old Abimelech’s head if I remember correctly. Yes, we were a jolly little party enough, regular little birds in the nest and all that sort of thing, and now we’ve all flown out one by one, or fallen out, or got booted out, and poor old Abimelech came up against something harder even than the gate in the end. Well, we mustn’t repine, what’s done can’t be undone, and he never proved of much use in life. Perhaps he was useful enough to the heathen seeing that they weren’t particular. Many’s the night I’ve hung on to this gate singing, ‘ I won’t go home till morning,’ many’s the early morn I’ve negotiated it and crept upstairs hoping I might strike it lucky for once, and not wake the pater, but I never did, I never did ! He was an infernally light sleeper. Take us altogether we are not a lucky family. We roll down hills easier than climb up ’em, and fall down and break our crown into the bargain, and fall over everything in the hall first go off. Oh the sweet memories, the innocent joys of innocent days ! ”

I began to hope we should find Mr. and Mrs. Kearness

out. It did not seem to me that they would find much in common with our visitor.

Of course we found them in. They seemed more surprised than pleased to see us, I thought, and greeted the adventurer without much warmth.

I am glad to say Satan lost himself and did not insist on also coming inside. When he gets into another person's house he is consumed with a burning curiosity regarding it. He has to see every room and everything it contains if possible. He plays a game with himself that it is his own house and scampers both under and over the beds. Parrots, cats, nervous invalids, all object to it, as also do housewives on account of muddy marks on counterpanes and sheets, so we always command him specially to stay at home. For what he does against our express commands we have never been able to hold ourselves responsible. I need not worry about Charles and that was something.

"So you're back again Percy," said my father-in-law to his brother.

Mrs. Kearness looked the visitor up and down. I think she was rather impressed by his air of ease and confidence, and by his very expensive raincoat. He hung it up in the hall with the silk lining and name of it's famous maker visible. I must say it looked rather resplendent, and I could not help regarding it a little wistfully. My own garment sagged with shame and age, and tried to shrink out of notice. Sophonisba had called it a disgrace, and seeing it now, I could not but agree with her, and I think Mrs. Kearness thought so too. She certainly seemed almost to resent it's presence in her hall.

"You are just in time for tea," she said, if not graciously exactly, yet not icily either. I could see the

raincoat was causing her to unthaw, and did hope uncle would do nothing to make her freeze again.

Percy started, "Gad, do you still drink tea!" he exclaimed astonished.

"What else should we drink at this hour?" she demanded stiffly, and Sophonisba's uncle at once said he did not know, that the problem was beyond him. He took his cup to the open window. When he came back it was empty, and he asked for more and I could see Mrs. Kearness was pleased, "It's many a long day since I've tasted tea like this," he said, and went to the window, and remarked, "Same old view, I see!"

"It is considered very beautiful," said Mr. Kearness almost hotly, "and the air is still the most salubrious in the county. The doctor says it is a tonic in itself, and people coming here sometimes find it almost intoxicating."

"Yes," agreed Percy, "there were times when I used to find it so myself."

His brother looked at him sharply, and then hastily away. Rumour has it that before his reformation, Percy had been intoxicated rather frequently, though on nothing so cheap as air. I saw however that Mr. Kearness,—as a Christian and gentleman,—was striving to forget the past.

"So you have made a fortune?" he asked,—rather doubtfully, I thought.

Percy waved his toil-worn hands, "With these have I laboured," he said "day in and day out, Sundays and holidays not excepted, even if the food was better, but thank goodness my time is done, and I am now in easy circumstances and intend to remain in them come what will." He set his mouth into a hard line of determination, and it occurred to me that what he had made up his mind to carry through would be somehow

accomplished. "You little know what I have had to endure, since, a careless lighthearted boy, I left home to seek my fortune."

Again Mr. Kearness tried to be a Christian and a gentleman, and not to remember that Percy had scarcely been a boy, or careless or lighthearted, but a man and a criminal, seeking, not fortune, but how best to avoid pursuing justice. And that he had not fled alone.

"Quite so," he said hastily, "quite so! Have some more tea?"

Percy, as hastily, declined.

"How long are you staying?" asked Mrs. Kearness. Throughout she treated him more as a visitor one was hardly on visiting terms with, than as a relative.

Uncle seemed amused at the question, "Oh I hope to make quite a good stay," he said, "but time will show. The three girls are out, it seems? Too bad, but perhaps there are three young men—rich young men let us hope, and not too-sharp young men—who think that good fortune rather than bad, eh?"

"I am thankful to say my daughters are not girls of that sort," said Mrs. Kearness icily, "I should never permit it."

"There aren't any rich young men, or any young men at all—worse luck!" said Sophonisba, and added, "there was only Edward. And I got him."

She beamed at me, and I beamed back.

Mrs. Kearness gave an impatient sort of sigh, "You will see them sometime to-day, I expect," she remarked, "They are often up at Moss End. They are beautiful girls,—if I say it who should not,—but there are no openings now-a-days in this country, all professions are so over-crowded. What openings are there in the Colonies?" She leaned forward eagerly.

"About ten husbands for every spinster," returned uncle, "quite excellent openings. You ought to pack 'em off before it's too late—poor girls."

Mrs. Kearness coloured angrily, and drew herself up, "You mistake me, I am surprised you should say such a thing. The question of husbands has nothing to do with the matter, and is quite the last thing that would occur to any of us. Isn't it, William?"

Mr. Kearness opened his mouth and eyes very wide, and after a pause, said it was. Then he sighed and looked at his boots which were sadly in need of repair.

"I should hate to lose my daughters too quickly," said Mrs. Kearness, "as for marriage, everybody knows the old proverb that hanging and marrying go by destiny——"

"And that you get it in the neck both ways," muttered Percy, though fortunately not very loud.

"You have heard the proverb, have you not Edward?" asked Mrs. Kearness turning to me.

"If it was destiny that gave me Sophonisba, I am grateful to it," I said gravely.

Sophonisba went her lovely pink, Mrs. Kearness reddened also. They both looked at me and each other, and then quickly away again.

"Shall we leave it at that?" asked Sophonisba with a funny sort of smile.

Percy seemed amused, "Call it destiny, old son, and be done with it," he said in his easy way, "I congratulate destiny upon it's success."

He bowed, first to Mrs. Kearness, then to Sophonisba. I had not guessed his manners were so courtly.

Mr. Kearness kept staring as if he wondered what we were all talking about, and wished we wouldn't, and that we would go home. I began to want to go myself. There was something in the air,—a sort of

electric current,—that alarmed me. Percy however was in no hurry to depart. I think he had been a little nervous about his reception and stayed to make a good impression.

“In this world it is success that counts, success first and last and solely—and minding one’s ‘p’s’ and ‘q’s’ and not getting found out more than is necessary,” he remarked pleasantly.

“Tut, tut,” said Mr. Kearness looking very clerical.

“I said in this world, old chap, I haven’t staked a claim in the next—that’s your province, and I never intrude. As a prodigal I can but humbly admire, but as a brother I cannot follow in your footsteps.”

“There is always joy in the sinner that repenteth,” said Mr. Kearness in a sort of pompous-pulpit tone which made me very uncomfortable. It seemed to have the same effect upon Sophonisba, for she wriggled, and got out her watch, and looked at the door, just as if she were in church.

Mr. Kearness looked at her and bit his lip.

“You repent all right when you get found out,” groaned uncle, “Careless devil that I was, leaving evidence all over the shop! Still, one learns by experience, and I’m pretty careful now. However,” he spoke very hastily, “that’s an old story, nearly thirty years old, and let bygone be bygones, is my motto. Lucky that I made my little mistake under another name, as you all know, and didn’t bring disgrace on my dear family.”

“Things leak out in a place like this,” said Mr. Kearness gloomily, “and everybody knows that once—but as you say, that’s all over and done with.”

“Quite so, no need to blush for the returned empty. I swore when I came out, to lead a new life and do myself well, and I’ve kept my word. You could do

with a new carpet, old man, I wish I had brought my money-bags along."

"Have you left them behind?" asked Mrs. Kearness, sharply, almost suspiciously, I thought. There might have been no money-bags by her manner. Yet he had spoken of them, openly, simply, frankly, himself.

"Temporarily in the rear, dear Mary, temporarily in the rear. I have a trusted and valued secretary who runs all my affairs, writes my cheques, pays my hirelings, and so on. A millionaire must have these parasites. I've only got to cable to him to get through with all the arrangements and take the first steamer back to the old country, and he's here on the wings of the morning. My money is still mostly on paper, that big Rand strike just recently made things pretty nasty for a while, but he's got my instructions to sell out and realise everything. So there's a good time coming, dear people, and don't you forget it! We will forget the indiscretions of the past together—after all we've all had 'em, it's only the difference of being found out or otherwise——"

"I must insist—" began my father-in-law indignantly.

"Dear old chap, don't you worry! What's done can't be undone, and there's an end to it, and as long as you weren't spotted. What's the world after all? Half of it is mad, the other half bad. Every second man would be in prison and every second woman too, and if not in prison, in an asylum, if people could see into their hearts and brain-pans, and we'll all be mad as hatters in a few generations or so. Don't you worry, Willy, you're not likely to be found out now, or Mary either. But never mind the past, our future indiscretions will be simple pecuniary ones. Diamonds go

well with grey hair and dark eyes," he looked admiringly at Mrs. Kearness, "above all a distinguished presence seems to call for 'em. You just wait and see, dear Mary; it's a pretty useful motto, and I've learnt it among other things when I was out, for, if I was not often out, I was not always in. And you William, require a church more worthy of your intellect. Why not have a cathedral? Then you'd be a bishop, wouldn't you, and have the time of your life, eh what?"

He smiled at them archly, shaking a finger, and looking very shrewd.

They hesitated for a moment, then they smiled back again.

However Mr. Kearness soon stopped smiling, and sat looking very thoughtful and rather worried. I wondered if he was thinking how to fill a new big church seeing that he cannot fill a small one. It certainly was rather a problem. He could not, he knew, look to his own family to fill it. There are things that money cannot buy, and a congregation, it seems, is one of them.

A bark and a scutter sounding from over our heads made me start nervously. Then I pretended not to hear, and Sophonisba pretended too. I wondered where Charles was, and felt my face go damp.

Mrs. Kearness at once turned accusingly to me. "You never brought that dreadful dog!"

"Oh no! I never bring him!" I assured her, hastily and truthfully, though I could see she did not believe me.

"But he is here now!" she cried.

"Is he?" I asked, and tried to sound incredulous and astonished. Sophonisba went and looked at the view.

The bark and scamper sounded louder. It was a

bark of enjoyment and high spirits, and mine fell. I knew what that meant. Our ideas of enjoyment are not quite the same.

"Can't you hear him?" Mrs. Kearness demanded indignantly.

Happily there was a moment's silence, "Oh no," I assured her earnestly. I got it out very quickly so that it could be the truth, and I was none too soon. He barked again. I could hear him shaking and worrying something. I got up to go. I did not want to be there when he arrived with the remains of Charles. It was not as if I could do any good, and my presence would only make matters more painful.

"There he is again," declared Mrs. Kearness, and rushed to the door, "why is he here if you did not bring him?"

"I suppose he just came," I said simply.

"It's disgraceful how you train that dog!"

"I don't train him. He won't let me."

"He must be in my bedroom of all places! What on earth can he be doing there?"

"I don't know," I said faintly, and I hoped I didn't.

It was a muddy day. Satan is most clean and particular, and can't bear being muddy. He rubs it off on the first thing he fancies to roll upon, and I did hope he had not fancied Mrs. Kearness' bed.

My hopes proved vain. Mrs. Kearness made me go up to her room to see for myself, "There!" she exclaimed dramatically, pointing.

Satan is far too sharp ever to be caught in the act, but I must say circumstantial evidence was strongly against him; no jury but would have convicted him upon it. He had played his game of rats with her shoes when he was about it. As a killer of rats he is justly famed. It was all very awkward, though it

might have been worse, seeing that Satan himself had slipped away and was probably nearly home by this.

“And that is not all,” said Mrs. Kearness in a dreadful voice, her face very pale.

“Charles ? ” I breathed rather than said.

“You inhuman wretch ! To suggest such a thing ! As if I don’t know you hate all cats, and my poor Charles especially. No, Charles is not in the house, thank goodness.”

She did not thank goodness more fervently than I.

She pointed to the bed, and I trembled before her as one might tremble before Lady Macbeth, “Edward, my new best hat was on that bed ready to wear for the first time. Where is it now ? ”

There was rather an awful pause.

“How s-s-should I k-k-know ? ” I stammered.

“There, I always told Soapy the poor boy had got it from you, though she would not allow it ! But never mind Edward, or Billium either just now.”

“I wasn’t,” I said miserably.

“Don’t prevaricate, Edward, and don’t contradict, and trifle. You are too old to behave in such a fashion. Where is my hat, I ask you that ? ”

I looked wildly round.

“Satan would never touch your hat—at least not your best hat,” I said with more heat than conviction. Something told me he had played rats with that also. It was hard on me, I felt.

“He is well-named,” said Mrs. Kearness very bitterly, “a regular little dev—— fiend. He has got my hat. I saved up two years to buy it, and it’s the smartest and most becoming I ever had.”

“If it has got mislaid——” I began, “you must allow me to order half-a-dozen——”

She checked me majestically, “How dare you sug-

gest such a thing ! You may buy hats for my daughter, you will not buy them for me, Edward. I have my pride and self-respect."

She had both in excess.

"I want my hat," she went on, a quiver in her voice.

"Perhaps one of your servants is trying it on," I suggested hopefully. If only she would go and see and let me slip away home ! It was not such a bad suggestion, Sophonisba has often said she is sure Jane tries on hers.

"My servant doesn't do that sort of thing," she said stiffly, "I do not allow it."

"Sophonisba doesn't exactly allow it either," I began, "but all——"

"That will do, Edward, this is mere trifling. It's that horrible dog and I know it ! I will have him destroyed."

I was panic-stricken, not that I would allow it of course, but at the mere threat. It would make things so painful for me. "I give you my word of honour Satan can't possibly have touched your hat," I cried, and rushed wildly downstairs.

She rushed after me, and everybody ran into the hall and asked what had happened.

"It's that Satan," began Mrs. Kearness.

"Hush, Mary, I am surprised at you !" commanded her husband.

"No, I won't hush. You can't make me out of church if I don't want to. It's the dog-one. The other wouldn't have touched my hat——"

"What hat ?" asked Mr. Kearness staring.

"*What* hat ! just like a man ! My new hat of course."

"It was a great extravagance," said Mr. Kearness pursing up his lips, and eyeing his shabby boots, "I

have often warned you of the desire of the eye, Mary."

"What tosh, pater," burst in Sophonisba, "What have you done to the mater's hat? I call it a shame. It was a topper, and if ever woman deserved it she did."

"It's Satan, Edward's horrible dog," went on Mrs. Kearness half crying, "Oh I shall never get over it!"

"Did he bite you?" asked uncle. "Where?"

"He never bites," stated Sophonisba positively and instantly.

I looked at her with gratitude.

"Doesn't he," returned Percy, "What price me! He bit me. In the leg. I might go down with hydrophobia any time."

"He didn't mean to," I said, but without conviction, for after all he had seemed to mean it—rather.

"A mere scratch," cried Sophonisba, "Dear little fellow!"

"Did he get your leg, Mary?" asked Percy.

"Of course not! I am surprised you should suggest such a thing!"

"You should see mine!"

She drew herself up, "I have no wish to do so."

"If Satan ever did bite anyone it would be because there was somethin' wrong with his character or brains or somethin', an' he knew it through instinct, an' did it as a duty to warn people," burst out Sophonisba getting pinker and pinker, "I should very much dislike anyone Satan bit. He was only playin' with you uncle, an' I wonder at you sayin' such things. Why he lets you give him bones, you know he does—what more do you want?"

"A whole leg," said uncle rather shortly.

"It never went through. I noticed specially."

"Didn't it! I'll show you whether I was bitten or not," and rather to my surprise, he began to pull up the leg of his trouser.

Mrs. Kearness stopped him, her face quite scarlet—"I will take your word for it," she said, "he is capable of anything. I am surprised at you, Sophonisba!"

"What's a leg anyway?" asked Sophonisba carelessly, "an' an uncle's leg at that! Why fuss, mater?"

"Be quiet," said my mother-in-law, redder than ever, and Sophonisba grinned and changed the subject. "Let's go round the garden," she suggested, "uncle will want to see the garden——"

She paused abruptly, and we all avoided each other's eye as we tried,—quite violently—not to let the word lead us to gardeners and gardeners' wives. There are times however when all roads seem to lead to Rome, and this was one of them. Edward the Second and Billium tell me that if you see a piebald horse and wish without thinking of it's tail, you obtain your wish. They say they always remember not to think of it's tail, and have never got a wish yet. It was the same with the gardener's wife; she was, so to speak, the tail of the piebald horse, and we could only remember not to think of her.

Uncle seemed the only unembarrassed one among us. It was obvious that he had quite forgotten the episode. Perhaps it had never happened, or had been grossly exaggerated. I, at least, preferred to think so.

"Very nice," said Percy absently looking round, "reminds me more than ever of my youth. A great credit to your gardener. I suppose you have a gardener?"

"Yes—but he's unmarried," burst out Mrs. Kearness in a flustered sort of way.

Then we all dragged the subject away from gardens and gardeners, and Sophonisba said we really must be going.

My father-in-law took me aside.

“I hope it’s all right about Percy,” he began anxiously, “I dare not feel too certain. He was always such an outrageous born liar, and things look a bit suspicious to me. I beg you will keep your eyes open, my dear fellow, and if things turn out badly get rid of him at once. Above all let me know if he tries to borrow money. I would give a good deal to believe he is really reformed and has made money, but I’m afraid it would take rather strong proofs to convince me. I would not have you put upon for the world. You are too good-natured by half; people take advantage of you. He may have got the money,—he often had as a boy,—but then it was never his own money. I suppose,—as far as that goes,—a successful financier seldom has his own money either. I hope you will be careful Edward—careful in every way,” and he looked at me very meaningfully indeed, and added, “his influence used to be so unfortunate. He would demoralise anybody, make them as bad as himself in no time. I wish he hadn’t come, or had brought evidence with him that he is what he affects to be. As it is I have doubts, very strong doubts.”

I was rather horrified at this unbrotherly attitude, and could not feel that the visit had been altogether a success. I thought these suspicions base, and said I felt quite certain in my own mind that Percy was everything he claimed to be, if not more.

Mr. Kearness said it would be the more that would matter. Then he left on some parish matter, and we went home.

“I shall never get the taste of that tea out of my

mouth," lamented uncle to me, "I took a gulp without thinking · the rest I had the presence of mind to pour out of the window. It made me think of the bad old times when I asked for whisky and they gave me tea. Now when I ask for tea, I expect to be given whisky, ha, ha!"

As soon as we got in, he asked for tea, and I saw that he had it. I quite understood, that to a man of his varied and adventurous career, tea might seem a trifle effeminate and tame.

Then Sophonisba and I walked blissfully round the garden arm-in-arm, and said what a nice man he was, and how nice it would be for the Kearnesses to be well-provided for, for Percy had made no secret of his generous intentions.

"A triple weddin' would be great fun, an' awfully excitin', an' no end of a knock-out to the other mothers," said Sophonisba squeezing my arm in great glee, and looking lovely with a dreamy far-away romantic look in her eyes, "It will be a blessed relief to get Kathleen off at last, she really has hung fire dreadfully. Goodness—what's that!" She clung to me, and screamed.

I nearly screamed too.

It was Satan and all that was left of Mrs. Kearness' hat that I had given my word of honour about. Of course Satan could not know that.

"Oh——bother!" I exclaimed.

Satan gave a whoop of delight. His tail wagged very hard as he laid his present down at my feet, and harder than ever when I said, "Bad dog!"

"Dear little fellow!" cried Sophonisba.

I buried the hat, deciding to say nothing to Mrs. Kearness, and Sophonisba helped me. She agreed that it was the only thing to be done.

“After all a hat is a hat, an’ the mater is the mater,” she said gravely.

“So they are,” I returned. It was not a subject I felt I could discuss with Mrs. Kearness. She might not care for it. After all, the best hat of a woman, and that woman a vicar’s wife, is a sacred subject, and not one to be taken in hand lightly or unadvisedly by mere ignorant blundering man.

So I buried it very deep indeed.

Satan watched the operations with his head on one side, an ear cocked knowingly, and his tail wagging his body rather than the more usual way about. But then Satan was not just the usual sort of dog. I have often thought it extraordinary what a vast amount of tireless work that small member called his tail put in during the course of his long and happy life. Most would have called it working overtime.

CHAPTER IV

A VISIT OF INSPECTION

SOME "little bird" is always telling my sister-in-law Pansy something, usually that which the person concerned least of all desires she should know.

Sophonisba, in moments of exasperation, has been known to allude to Pansy as an interfering old cat, and they never get on very well together. Sophonisba can never forgive my sister-in-law for bringing me up, "I don't mean that you don't do her credit, Edward," she explained, "but it was such beastly cheek, and she's always rubbin' it in."

They had had, I believe, some words on the matter, at their last meeting.

"I said," reported Sophonisba afterwards to me, "'if you did bring him up it was me that married him, and I guess the odds are on me.'"

"And what did she say to that?" I asked. I have never known Pansy at a loss for words.

Sophonisba went her pretty pink, and tossed her head, "Oh, she said it was very clever of me, and most fortunate—for dear Edward! The sarcastic beast!"

"Why sarcastic?" I asked amazed.

Sophonisba took no notice of my question, "And when she began about 'a little bird told me,' I just said, 'you keep the little birds busy an' no mistake, regular sweatin' I call it.' That choked her off for a minute or two."

"She does certainly like a finger in the pie—" I began ruefully.

"I wouldn't mind a finger, but nothin' less than a whole hoof contents that woman. Bang! And the pie is busted! He's my uncle, not hers, but that won't stop her. She'll find something wrong with the poor dear if she has to hunt for a week, an' I'm sure he's very sensitive. Now Edward if she comes messin' round you've got to stand up to her for once, an' just tell her plainly to mind her own business."

I promised. I always do. Then Pansy comes and I remember the days of my youth and her drastic upbringing, and forget that actually she is not so many years my senior; but she had been a managing young bride, I a shy boy of ten. "After all what's our uncle to her?" I asked.

"Just what she choses to make him" grumbled Sophonisba, "you know that if we had a Heavenly Visitant—not that it's likely, thank goodness!—Pansy would sniff, and at once say: "*all* angels aren't the white sort," and insist on knowing how his wings worked, and probably say they weren't genuine. Edward, why are angels always spoken of as "he"? Aren't there any "she" ones? Is it all this new sex antagonism or what? Is that why women want the vote, an' suffragettes get so mad an' smash an' burn for all they are worth?"

I gasped. I can admire Sophonisba's original and subtle flights from a distance. I cannot, alas! follow them. I merely said there might be something in that point of view, and suggested she should ask her father who was a clergyman and possibly more up in the subject.

"Oh, clergymen never know anythin'" she returned, "that's why they go into the church. Not that the

poor pater went exactly, he had to be jolly well shoved. The crammer-johnny did it all. They mostly do."

I gasped again. To live with Sophonisba is a liberal, and delightful, education. I am always learning something new.

Then there came a knock at the door, and Dorothea came in to say that Angus had noticed Pansy getting out of the train, and sent word to say she was coming straight up.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Sophonisba exasperated, "Dash the woman!" 'Dash' was not exactly the word she used, but near enough.

"Here she comes," I said looking out of the window. I am continually being struck with the handsome majesty of my sister-in-law who is what is known as a 'fine figure of a woman,' and dresses well. I said something of the sort as we waited her coming.

Sophonisba however only snorted, "You wouldn't have said that when she crawled out of the bag dressed like——" she began.

"How fortunate to find you at home," exclaimed a voice, and Pansy was upon us.

My wife and sister-in-law kissed and said how delighted they were to see each other, and looking so well too, but the word 'uncle' was never mentioned. Sophonisba said she insisted upon her staying to luncheon (it was not far short of that hour, and, as we knew quite well, there was no train back till after tea) and Pansy allowed herself to be persuaded. So far, so good! But then Sophonisba had to leave us, and it was not good at all.

She at once came to the point. "A little bird——" she began.

I was irritated, and retorted rather rudely, "It's the

nesting season, and the little birds ought to be busy feeding their young."

"Don't try and be funny, Edward, you haven't the figure for it. The mere fact of having married a girl almost young enough to be your daughter doesn't make a boy of you, though you seem to think it does. Now my dear," she patted my hand, for the odd thing is that Pansy is fond of me and means everything for the best, and that—now and then—I am fond of Pansy. And then I can never forget that when our boys were dangerously ill with a contagious illness, she helped Sophonisba to nurse them, and undoubtedly saved Edward the Second's life. "Now my dear, what's this about a dead uncle dropping down like a bolt from the blue, and with only one bag! What sort of a bag, Edward?"

I reddened, stooping to pick up something that wasn't there.

"He isn't dead," I said heavily at length.

"As if that's any excuse. Of course he would say he isn't, but can he prove it—I mean—" she stopped confused, "You know what I mean," she continued, "is he her uncle, or isn't he? Can he prove *that*? Who recognised him?"

"He recognised us," I said triumphantly, "at least he recognised Sophonisba." I remembered the painful incident of the young man who 'wasn't quite,' and how fiercely he had resented being taken for me. "And we took him to the Vicarage and Mr. Kearness wasn't at all pleased to see him."

"Exactly! Just what I thought! Nobody recognised him. He just said he was a relation and you took him in—or rather he took you in—" again she paused confused. "All dead relations who have been dead for thirty years, are better left dead. You will be sorry you dug this one up."

I shuddered at her horrible way of putting it.

"If he isn't her uncle, but some adventurer who will murder you all in your beds, it's bad enough, but if he is, it's worse, seeing what Percy Kearness was. There will be an awful scandal, mark my words, as well as murdering, and robbing, and goodness knows what. For goodness sake don't leave things about while he's here."

"What things?" I asked wearily. I wondered how much she knew.

"Money, cheques, church funds, the key of the wine-cellar, and—gardeners wives, Edward."

It's uncanny how she always knows everything; almost more than everything.

"Of course he will take advantage of you," she went on positively, "everybody and everything does. Your very fowls know it, and laugh in your face in their fowl way."

"Really Pansy—" I was roused. The subject of the fowls always roused me.

"Edward, do they or do they not, lay eggs?"

"If they haven't so far, they are sure to when they think of it," I returned defensively.

"When they think of it!" she echoed, "Just the sort of thing you would say! Meanwhile they don't think of it, never will think of it, and you keep them as pets, and buy your eggs at the farm. And now it's Percy Kearness."

"He was only a little wild, Sophonisba said so," I returned, "and he's repented, and had a hard time to make all that money——"

"Money, what money?"

"Oh a million or something like that."

"Well he may be her uncle—have you seen evidences of his wealth? One must be careful of course, not

judge too hardly, or take too much for granted either. A millionaire with only one bag—and such a bag ! ”

So she knew about the bag as well ! How much did she know, I wondered.

“ What were it’s contents ? ” she asked me sharply, “ for all I know queer things came out of that bag.”

I thought of Sophonisba’s dream, “ They did,” I began feelingly, and then added, “ at least I don’t know. He unpacked alone.”

“ That looks bad. How was he dressed ? ”

“ Very tightly,” I murmured, and corrected myself hurriedly, “ I mean very smart, well-fitting, you know, gloves and an eyeglass and a buttonhole.”

“ Bad, very bad. The poorer you are the better you have to dress. Only a millionaire can afford to be really shabby. Now does he own yachts, motors and so on ? ”

“ Yes ; he mentions them constantly.”

“ But hasn’t brought them ? Only that awful bag. Millionaire indeed,—more like a gaol-bird ! ”

“ You are speaking of my wife’s uncle ! ” I exclaimed with heat.

“ Exactly. If one’s own relations are bad, what about the ones one marries ? The fact is, Edward, you are not only infatuated with your own wife, but infatuated after years of matrimony, and with two boys the very image of her—poor dears ! It’s the most extraordinary phenomenon I’ve ever seen, and it simply can’t last, you’re bound to get your eyes open sooner or later. You have always been odd, but never actually insane. And now you take this person calling himself an uncle to your bosom ! ”

“ Calling himself—” I began.

“ Well *doesn’t* he call himself her uncle ? You said yourself he did.”

I was silent. That is the worst of Pansy, her arguments are so often unanswerable. And all the time she was meaning well. She imagined we were being imposed upon, and wanted to save us from the consequences of our rashness.

“Oh Edward everybody takes you in ! It all comes of believing so absurdly in human nature ! ”

“I am no longer a helpless foolish old bachelor,” I cried stung, “I am a married man, Pansy, and I wish you would remember it.”

But Pansy did not accept the reproof ; she just laughed, “You are so *funny*,” she exclaimed wiping her eyes, “You are just an old bachelor with a wife and boys. A married man hasn’t romantic ideas about his wife. If he has any romantic ideas they are for other peoples wives, or other women. You are such an old bachelor, that really Sophonisba and the boys seem almost like impropriety——”

“Really——” I began indignantly.

“Yes, really. Why even Sophonisba never regards you in the light of a regular husband——”

“I should hope not indeed,” I began, and then paused in confusion. Pansy could never see the nice distinction, “sometimes I can’t understand how I got married,” I said, “it seems too wonderful.”

“I can understand it, Edward. A man is asking for trouble when he comes to a place with twenty-nine of them all trying to. Of course one of them married you, and I suppose it might be worse.”

“As if it could be better——” I was beginning.

“Never mind that,” interrupted my sister-in-law, “we were discussing uncles, or people calling themselves uncles and millionaires, only you never keep to the point, and will talk such a lot it makes a person feel quite breathless. So your infatuation extends

to your wife's relations ! I trust hers extends to yours ? ” She eyed me sharply.

I went most frightfully red.

“ He is so entertaining. You should hear some of his stories——”

“ I prefer not to. How men can laugh at such indecencies——”

“ I don't mean that sort, and I never laugh or listen to indecencies, Pansy, his adventures——”

“ Camp-fires, pistols, pirates, balloons, wild beasts and that sort of thing, I suppose ! He will keep the boys quiet at anyrate. These adventurers are pretty good at adventures, to say nothing of adventuresses. Well, I will see the creature for myself, and let you know if there's any chance of him being genuine. But of course there isn't.”

“ He has a delightful sense of humour,” I said slyly, for Pansy believes herself to possess the same.

“ *All* people with a sense of humour like poking fun at other people,—especially relations,—better than having it poked at them,” she returned, “ I suppose he's tall and dark and dashing with bold black eyes ? ” She spoke in rather a thrilled voice.

“ Oh he isn't as like a pirate as all that,” I said with some sarcasm, “ he's just a trim, rather fat little man, with a bland face and very light eyes, so light one cannot find the pupils.”

“ *All* people without pupils are mad or bad, usually both. Oh Edward what have you imported into your house ! Talk of snakes ! ”

I was too horrified to reply. I had seen a short stout figure slip past the window. How long had he been there ? How much had the libelled man been compelled to overhear ? I burst into a profuse perspiration. There would be a dreadful scene. He would

refuse to be introduced to his traducer. She would say, "I told you so! He isn't an uncle *or* a millionaire!"

And just then the gong went, and Pansy, moving quickly to the door, said, "Thank goodness, I was starving." There was no escape. I followed her miserably, and found Sophonisba and Percy Kearness already in the dining-room. Sophonisba's uncle never keeps us waiting a minute for meals.

I performed the introduction somehow or other. Then I stepped back rather hurriedly, and waited for the explosion.

When none came I ventured to open my eyes.

Sophonisba's uncle was gazing at Pansy with the greatest admiration. It was passionate, respectful, and regretful, all in one. I noticed that he seemed absolutely floored with her majesty and beauty, and I think Pansy noticed it too, for her cheek flushed slightly, and her handsome eyes sparkled. I had never seen her to better advantage. And her manners were as charming as her appearance, "How glad your people must be to have you home at last," she said.

He continued to hold her hand and gaze admiringly, "England home and beauty, how we poor wanderers miss it!" He dropped her hand, blowing his nose emotionally. He seemed very much overcome. "You must forgive me," he said in a low voice, "but there was a girl once—a fair English rose—miserable wastrel that I was in those days! What could the poor child do but marry into the peerage?" He blew his nose again.

I could see Pansy was impressed, and sorry for Sophonisba's uncle.

He took her hand again. "Ah dear lady you remind me of her as she was in her best days, though

she was never as regal, as patrician. Forgive these personalities, but I look upon you in the light of a relation."

Pansy, somewhat to my astonishment, did not repudiate the relationship.

He took the next place to her at the table as a matter of course, "Boundless wealth," he sighed, "and an empty hearth. I cannot buy youth or love. I can only hope to make the younger generation happy, our dear Edward, our dear Sophonisba, and their dear boys. May they have what I never had, an Influence; may they be worthier members of society!"

"Goodness me! Fancy that now!" I heard Sophonisba ejaculate to herself. I thought she was eyeing her uncle in almost a suspicious fashion.

"You are young yet," returned Pansy, "as for the past, well that's over and forgotten, and boys will be boys as we all know."

"Ah fair lady, you can make allowances out of your great charity, out of your great knowledge of human nature, but alas! the world is not so broad-minded. Do you think I don't know that I am looked upon with suspicion as the returned prodigal, that the whole neighbourhood remembers what I was, and tells itself the man is father to the boy."

"Abominable," cried Pansy, "what of christianity. Is there no charity, no understanding?"

"Very little—at least among the bourgeois, dear Hermione. Ah, forgive me, but you are so like her, and the name fits you so."

Pansy forgave him graciously.

He dropped his voice, "Do you think they forget I came with only one bag in my haste to see my dear ones? The herd will doubt my wealth because I left my servants behind, my yachts, my motors, and so on. One

gets so tired of the empty frivolities of life. I wanted to return to nature, to simplicity, to live as the fowls of the air." He passed his plate for another helping of soufflé, and poured out another portion of whisky. "Do the neighbours call it the simple life, Hermione? Not they! Like Punch, they either say, or think, that it's the 'sinful life,' I'm after." He looked at Jane and sighed, and she brought him another portion of soufflé. "It's a hard world," he added.

Pansy looked down protectingly at the round bland face that barely reached her shoulder, "My dear Mr. Kearness take no notice of it. It's a very silly world, and full of fools."

"Call me Percy," he implored, "we are kin, you know, more than kin, for to me you must always represent the lost ideal."

"Fancy!" murmured Sophonisba staring.

"Thirty years ago I left under a bit of a cloud," he went on, "and I have come back under a cloud which has assumed gigantic proportions in the meanwhile. That is life, dear lady. And so I must be moving on, the wandering Jew to the end. These young people," he waved his hand at Sophonisba and me, "are honeymooners still. A mere bachelor uncle cannot but feel *de trop*!"

We felt the accusation keenly and reddened, "What tosh!" exclaimed Sophonisba, "What us, an' kids an' all! 'Sides Edward is quite an old bird really. We don't—ever!"

Sophonisba can never bear people to suspect that we are lovers still. She says that sort of thing makes one look so peculiar. She usually adds, "You see it isn't as if I don't go in where I should go out, and go frightfully out everywhere else." She has also a horror that I should cheapen love (Heaven save the mark!)

by public forms of endearment. "Do be careful, Edward!" she is always saying, and I am so very careful that I sometimes wonder if strangers don't think I almost dislike my wife.

"Ah, you can't throw salt in your poor old Uncle's eyes—and talking about salt, shy birds your young English bachelors, eh? Their tails won't get in the way of the salt it seems. Three of them still at home."

"Salt's no good," sighed Sophonisba, "L.s.d. is more to the point these days. Of course Edward was different," she beamed at me happily.

"Edward was always eccentric," said Pansy, "I remember once——"

I created a diversion by breaking something. I hate these reminiscences of my sister-in-law. They are always undignified, and often indelicate. If I had been a fool Pansy had not suffered me gladly. It had been I who had suffered.

"Sugar, not salt, eh! Well we must see to it, we must see to it!" said Percy easily, "it's not as if any of them take after poor William."

"They are all so like their mother," I said, "except of course Sophonisba." Mrs. Kearness is still a beautiful woman. Her husband is more good than beautiful.

"No, that was an escape!" exclaimed Percy, "only one out of the five spoiled."

I was puzzled, "But surely Grace is like Mrs. Kearness too?" I said, while Sophonisba went pink and wriggled as she always does,—dear modest girl,—when beauty is mentioned. "Of course Sophonisba is the odd man out," I went on thankfully, "she was far too original to take after her parents at all. She is just unique."

"Unique——" Percy lingered over the word, "yes,

that's a good term. You would have to go far to fare worse."

He has a habit of misquoting slightly ; but we all know what he means.

Pansy smiled at him very prettily.

" Well, the three unmarried girls aren't unique fortunately—or unfortunately, and we must get them off the shelf, eh ? Grace and Sophonisba hopped off on their own, it seems, but perhaps these three pretty dears wouldn't mind an old uncle's finger in their pie."

" They would love it ! " said Sophonisba beaming, and helping him to some more whisky. Her glance to me said distinctly, " There, we've done the trick ! " She says she can never be really happy till all the girls are married.

" Here's to the jolly old past," exclaimed Percy suddenly raising his glass, " and to the beautiful present ! " He looked into Pansy's eyes.

She blushed.

" How are the classes getting on ? " asked Sophonisba, for Pansy has joined some ambulance classes and is very keen on the subject and her own progress. She told us again all about it, and her certificate, and so on. " If only one could get hold of a real accident ! " she sighed.

" Would that I could be that accident," exclaimed Percy gallantly, " what a nurse you would make, dear lady ! Alas ! you might prove more dangerous to the patient than his germs ! "

Pansy blushed again.

" What a wonderful life you must have had," she cried, " seen so much, been to so many strange lands ! Oh tell us some of your adventures ! "

He told us quite a lot, and they were all most won-

derful, like Bret Harte, only more so, if you know what I mean. Then he began talking of the wilds, of isolation, and of men who went mad for the sound of a human voice.

“There was a friend of mine,” he said, “who had a perfectly awful experience, stuck in one of these God-forsaken places, nowhere to spend his evenings, no music-hall, no nothing, and mind you he was a man who had been accustomed to doing himself well. In the end he was reduced to making love to his own wife, poor chap!”

“Dreadful!” agreed Sophonisba hurriedly, avoiding my eyes.

Then he told us other things, narratives full of shooting on sight, of camp fires, wild beasts and so on. I could see Pansy was enthralled, and the boys listened breathlessly, and asked him to take them back with him by the first train.

He shook his head at them sadly, “Alas dear boys I am a respectable member of society now! Wealth has its responsibilities. Sometimes I am afraid lest money should prove easier made than got rid of. It hangs round my neck like an incubus. Thank heaven I have relations! And yet, Hermione, it is all regret. I cannot undo the past, I have always lacked the Influence. If I could have but known that,—as other happier mortals have,—” he looked across at me, “I might have been poorer in worldly goods, but ah, how much richer in things that matter, things of the spirit—I say Edward where do you get this whisky?” He helped himself as he spoke, “I really must tell my steward to see that I have it in future. The fellow seemed to think I had to eat and drink what he liked—a regular gaoler!” He gave one of his shrill galvanic laughs.

“ One puts up with too much from one’s servants,” said Pansy.

Percy looked at Jane, “ So one does, so one does,” he agreed, “ still it’s a world of give and take. Others do the giving, you the taking ! ” He laughed again.

“ You are so humorous,” exclaimed Pansy laughing, “ such a rare gift, and I do love a joke.”

“ Then love me,” he said daringly, “ for I’m a joke right enough.”

Pansy looked rather taken aback.

“ Forgive me, dear Hermione. I am just a rough world-worn adventurer.”

“ Not at all,” she murmured.

“ A rough diamond,—all the better for cutting.”

“ How you would amuse James, my husband ! He loves wit, and none of his relations have any. Promise you will come and stay with us ? ”

“ I would, if it wasn’t for the husband in the way, dear lady—unless of course he’s too much of a gentleman to get in another man’s way.”

I don’t think Pansy quite knew how to take this. She is very attached to James, though she has no objection that others should admire,—and envy,—from a distance, but I imagine Percy Kearness was the first to do this.

“ You humorists—still you mustn’t, you know,” she cried reprovingly.

“ Dearest Hermione, say no more. All is forgiven. Come home to your loving father, eh ! ” He got up suddenly, and as suddenly sat down again, very nearly missing the chair. Then, after sitting quite still and silent for some time, he got up and went out. In the hall he fell down.

“ Really your children are too careless for words ! ”

exclaimed Pansy to Sophonisba, "I never let mine leave things about to trip up their uncle."

"Neither do I," said Sophonisba, "he tripped himself up, and I'm sure I'm not surprised." She looked at the whisky bottle.

"Where has he gone?" demanded Pansy.

"He always lies down for an hour or so after meals," returned Sophonisba rising, "and I don't wonder. He must have some disease to put away the amount he does."

"You grudge your own uncle,—and a millionaire,—his appetite!" gasped Pansy, "such a charming man too, so cultured, so brilliant. Full of philosophy, humour, and—and——"

"Whisky, to say nothin' of bunkum," added Sophonisba, "and how do you know he's a millionaire? It's easy sayin'. You should have seen his bag!"

"Of course he's a millionaire. Really Sophonisba——"

"Would a millionaire look at Jane like that?"

"Like what? I didn't notice him looking at Jane at all." Pansy face was scarlet.

Sophonisba got scarlet too.

I went out to see Angus about the garden and things generally. I always spend the afternoon in the garden when Pansy is at Moss End. Women have so much they like to discuss together. A man is in the way.

They came out later to look for me separately. I took care it was Sophonisba who found me.

CHAPTER V

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

“ **A**T last ! ” exclaimed Sophonisba thankfully, thrusting her arm through mine, “ what with sister-in-laws, an’ people callin’ themselves uncles, messin’ around, you and me are gettin’ regular strangers, Edward ! Lets go and sit in the old pig-stye, Pansy will never think of lookin’ for us there.”

“ That’s all right,” she said as we seated ourselves on the slab arrangement, “ Wasn’t it awful the way uncle pulled Pansy’s leg durin’ lunch, an’ her swallowin’ it all ? That’s the way a good-looking woman is ; she can digest anythin’. An’ the way she made him flirt with her, a regular comin’ on disposition, talk of ‘ glad eyes ’ ! Hermione indeed ! I don’t believe there ever was any Hermione ! I don’t believe he does repent ! I don’t believe he’s a millionaire. I don’t even believe he’s my uncle ! ”

“ My dearest girl ! ” I gasped.

“ Well, I never cared much for short fat men with light eyes, and I shall stop kissin’ him good night to be on the safe side. Fancy if I was kissin’ a strange man all the time, so awful for you, Edward ! I shall just keep my eyes skinned till I know for certain he’s rich and my uncle, and that it isn’t all a plant. An’ dear, you must lock up the whisky, you really must. What are we to do with all the empty bottles ? It will make such talk.”

I was horrified at this inhospitable suggestion, "these travelled people get hard heads," I said, "and he is old enough to know what's good for him."

"Lots of men never get old enough for that," she retorted, "what's he lyin' down for now? Tell me that! Is it just the grub, or is it mostly the whisky? As for Hermiones, for all we know, *his* Hermiones were the sort one can't talk about. The name of the gardener's wife was Sally. You are such a trustin' old thing. Lucky for you you've got me to look after you!"

"Lucky indeed!" I said fervently kissing her.

"So there you are," said a voice, and Pansy looked in at us. Sophonisba hurried away, and I came out whistling carelessly.

"It's wiser to whistle before the event, not after it," said Pansy drily, "There's something I want to ask you." She looked round to be sure we were alone, and went suddenly very red.

I began to feel uncomfortable. It must be something really frightful if Pansy hesitated.

"You won't think me indelicate, will you?"

"I hope not," I returned truthfully.

"Then Edward what became of the gardener's wife?"

I started. I had not expected this.

"She's dead—quite dead," I said hastily.

"What do you mean? Are you sure?"

"Oh absolutely certain."

"Abandoned creature, running away with a boy like that—poor motherless innocent little fellow!"

"But he had a mother!" I gasped when I could speak.

"He hadn't an Influence, Edward; he said so himself. So disrespectful of the creature, calling him by

his Christian name I shouldn't wonder, there's nothing they won't do. If it had only been the curate's! One could have blamed the curate."

I gasped again. Then I sought to change the subject, "wouldn't you like to see Edward the Second's rabbits?" I implored her.

"I wouldn't."

"The guinea-pigs; there are some baby ones?"

"Disgusting! There are each time I come!"

"Not each time, only rather often, Pansy, and it pleases the boys."

"Hush!"

"There's a new lady-rabbit——"

"To please the boys? Vermin!"

"The little pigs, just new?"

"Too new I shouldn't wonder."

I grew desperate, "there's Billy," I ventured, "B-B-Billy the W-W-Wur-r-rm——"

"Don't you go getting it too, or I shall go mad——"

"I am merely imitating——"

"You were doing it because you couldn't help it. I'm not certain that he hasn't got it from you, just as he's got all the other things from his mother."

"What other things?" I demanded.

"Oh face and figure, manners, brain——"

"He couldn't have done better," I broke in thankfully, "but you like to know about the boys and their pets, and I thought Billy the Worm would amuse you. He is very fat and they keep him in a flower-pot, and love him more than anybody else in the world. I believe if anything happened to Billy it would break their hearts."

"I am not in the least amused, Edward," said Pansy with rather awful majesty, and sailed into the house.

Nobody found me any more, and I would have spent

rather a dull afternoon if it had not been for Angus who had a new story. When the bell rang for tea I went in feeling cheerful enough.

Pansy and Sophonisba were on the best of terms ; they were discussing a local scandal, and the delinquencies of a certain very smart lady. Percy Kearness came in looking neater than ever, and he too was in the highest spirits.

As we were all chatting pleasantly together there came a ring at the front door, and a note was left for Sophonisba. She opened it and tossed it over to me, "An invitation to Lady Bown's garden-party," she said.

"Let me see," mused Percy, "that must be the nephew of the old man. I must remember to tell him a funny story about his uncle—a gay old boy."

"Oh we're not goin'," said Sophonisba hastily, her face very pink.

"Why not?" asked Pansy. Pansy loves society, and seldom refuses an invitation. I will not go as far as to say she goes whether asked or not, but she does not need to be asked very hard. I could see she was longing to come and stay with us and go to Lady Bown's garden-party. It is the great summer function of the year, and there is a rumour that royalty once attended it, or thought of doing so. I could see that Sophonisba was determined she should do nothing of the sort.

"I shall decline," she said shortly, "I've simply nothin' to wear."

"What nonsense," cried Pansy, and then added, looking Sophonisba up and down, "As if that mattered!"

"It does for me, whatever it may do for you," returned Sophonisba looking meaningly at me.

CHAPTER VI

ANGUS WILL NOT ADMIRE

THERE can be no doubt that Sophonisba's uncle is a most charming fellow, but Angus will not take to him, which is a trouble to me, and he alludes to him rather disrespectfully as "that there uncle."

It is the more trying as Percy Kearness really works very hard to win his good opinion. He even offered to help with the digging, "I'm more accustomed to hard labour than you might think Angus," he said gaily, laughing hard.

"Its what I do think," returned Angus sourly, taking up his spade and going to another part of the garden.

Percy would gladly discuss things with him, but Angus just closes the discussion. Then sometimes he makes a sort of pounce on a statement, as if he were a terrier shaking a rat. The statement comes out rather the worse for wear, and yet Sophonisba's uncle just perseveres. I am sure he will win over Angus yet, as he has won us all.

Of course Dorothea thinks like Angus, but then she is his wife, and Angus believes in man and wife thinking alike, and once said, "You can alluys train 'em to it, sir,—contrairy obstinate critters as they be." Dorothea is that wonderful person who housekeeps for us so perfectly that everything runs on oiled wheels, and

we can do what we like even in our own house. I engaged her myself years ago when I was only a shy and foolish bachelor, and Moss End without her and Angus would be unthinkable.

“I never saw such cabbages, even in places where they practically grow wild,” said Percy to Angus, “I assure you even France——”

“Huh! France!” echoed Angus contemptuously, spat into a flower-bed, and walked away.

Sophonisba’s uncle only laughed, “I believe he distrusts me,” he said hugely amused, “a most original person, quite a character.”

I got angry with Angus; it was little short of impertinence and I was not going to stand it. So I spoke to him about it, and a most unheard of thing happened.

Angus gave notice!

I rushed and told Sophonisba the incredible catastrophe, and she told me to go back at once and apologise and beg him to stay, which I did.

“If it comes to doin’ without relations, or valuable servants and friends, it’s got to be relations every time. Why Dorothea would go as well, and Dorothea’s Baby! You must be mad Edward, to go and put us in the soup like that!” I never saw Sophonisba so nearly cross, for though she must often find me dense and trying, she keeps her patience in a remarkable manner.

So Angus stayed, but he still spoke of “that there uncle,” and never spoke to him if he could help it.

“It’s extraordinary,” said Sophonisba vexed, “it is not often Angus is blind, and Dorothea is as bad, but then he thinks like her as a husband should. Uncle has such a beautiful character, he’s so observin’ an’ everythin’. He was talkin’ of you an’ the boys all mornin’, sayin’ how unusual you were. I tell you you were like an open book to him, Edward——”

“ Surely not ! ” I stammered aghast.

“ Absolutely read you through and through, and said I was simply too lucky for words. Then the boys ! He knows the boys to a ‘ t,’ and how unusual they are, not like other people’s boys at all. He wouldn’t be at all surprised to see Edward the Second Prime Minister. Billium he thinks will sit on the woolsack. Oh it was too sickenin’ of Pansy to try an’ choke me off him by sayin’ he wasn’t rich an’ a relation an’ all that, but then people like Pansy will say anythin’, an’ I never believed a word of it. Nobility of character is written on his—his brow. If you go into the village this mornin’ you might order some more whisky, an’ I wonder if Jones has some more mushrooms in ; never mind how expensive they are. I will make that all right with Dorothea.”

As I went on my errand, Sophonisba’s uncle joined me. He could not believe I had done all the furnishing myself as a bachelor, painted the pictures on the walls, and dug the garden. He said it was the most extraordinary thing he had ever come across in all his long and extraordinary experience. He said he was proud to call me nephew.

I said it was nothing, and begged him not to mention it, but he insisted on mentioning it at some length. Then he began to talk of Sophonisba and the boys as only a quick and unprejudiced observer could, and there was simply nothing he had not noticed. He said he had never known anyone in the least like Sophonisba, and added, “ if any chap came and said she was like poor old William I should just hit him.”

“ Nobody could possibly say that,” I observed thankfully.

“ I tell you, old son, they wouldn’t dare to ! William has a face like a spotted ham, but Sophonisba’s

complexion has been fondly kissed by the sun. Poor old sun, ha, ha ! ”

“ Kissed by the sun,” I echoed pleased, “ I can think those sort of things but I can never say them——”

“ I can say ’em, but I can’t—can’t tell a lie. Then William has a nose like a tea-spout with a hump in the middle and a break at the end, and Sophonisba’s is adorably retroussé. I’ve never seen a more retroussé nose than Sophonisba’s, so original, like all the rest of her. Then poor William’s mouth, a letter-box with a list to wind’ard, and Sophonisba’s just generous like the dear girl herself. His piggy little eyes, and hers of such dainty proportions. His figure, hands and feet, sheerly abominable, and Sophonisba so sensibly finished off, so engagingly plump ! A libel, old fellow, absolutely a libel, and don’t let it worry you ! It takes all sorts to make a world, you know, and even Williams have to be included as a warning, and so on. Why here is the poor chap—what a striking *unlikeness* ! ”

My father-in-law did not look pleased to see his brother.

“ Hullo devil-dodger, what ho sky-pilot ! ” Percy exclaimed, meaning well I am sure, but rather offending his clerical brother who dived into a cottage close by without a word.

“ Poor old William, that he should have come to this ! ” he sighed, “ well, well, every family must have it’s failure.”

I was shocked at him speaking in such terms of my respected father-in-law, and said how highly he was thought of. He returned to Sophonisba and the boys, and I was surprised how short the way seemed ; undoubtedly a most entertaining companion—Sophonisba’s uncle.

On my return I sought Sophonisba, “ you were right

about your uncle," I said, "most wonderful observation."

"Yes, and though it was only one bag, I feel sure he's rollin'; the sort of relation to do you credit. Did you meet anybody?"

"Your father. By the bye your uncle rather lacks reverence. He greeted him by 'Hullo, devil-dodger!' and I don't think your father liked it."

"He wouldn't. Still the poor pater *is* tryin' to dodge the devil I suppose when one comes to think of it, though whether he'll succeed or not, goodness knows! T'anyrate," she added philosophically, "it'll be all the same a hundred years hence, and can't be helped anyway. Did you order the mushrooms an' the whisky?"

"Yes, the mushrooms were frightfully up. I'm afraid Dorothea won't quite like it, as neither you nor I eat them. I wish Percy and your father got on better. Now I have always found your parents charming and so easy to get on with."

"You've never had to live with 'em. People don't know what people really are till they live with 'em, and of course you can't know about most of the world because it wouldn't be proper."

We had a delightful dinner, Sophonisba's uncle proving most entertaining, and he very thoughtfully retired to his own room immediately afterwards for an hour or so, leaving Sophonisba and me to stroll happily round the garden arm-in-arm. "I do hope he will stay weeks!" cried Sophonisba.

I agreed.

"Say five or six weeks," she went on, "not after that of course. It's jollier bein' just you an' me an' the boys, but six weeks isn't too long for relations that are rollin'."

“An angel would be in the way after six weeks,” I said.

“Oh an angel, thank goodness they don’t come round these days but a millionaire, an’ so understandin’! If only Angus and Dorothea weren’t so obstinate, but they get worse instead of better. Edward, do you try your best with Angus?”

“When I try he gives notice,” I returned gloomily.

Sophonisba turned pale, “Oh hush!” she shuddered.

You see Angus and Dorothea run us as well as the house and garden, keep all annoyances away, and make our money go as far as possible. Sometimes they almost make it go too far. They side with Sophonisba about me giving money away whenever I feel specially happy, which I do at least once daily, and Angus is forever protecting me against what he calls “wilful waste making woeful want.”

“Excuse me, sir,” he says firmly, “but a man has to be saved from his best instincts else where would he be, and the better the man the more aggravating and trying these here instincts always adoin’ of him down.”

It’s three to one against me, and there you are. When I came into a fortune it seemed to me that the best fun of all would be giving it,—or most of it,—away, but the ‘three fates’ have ordained otherwise, so that if my income of £5,000 a year is often overdrawn, my principle remains undepleted.

Sophonisba owned that Dorothea seemed upset about the high price of the mushrooms, and the large quantity I had ordered, “She as good as implied,” sighed my dear girl, “that it was a lot to go into an uncle who had only brought one bag—and such a bag! You know what those sort of people are, regular Atheists, never believin’ anythin’ they can’t see. They can’t see uncle’s

millions, so they think they aren't there. They imagine he is tryin' to get things out of us, instead of which we mean to get things out of him. It's dreadful to think of the three girls without any sort of husbands, an' Kathleen gettin' so long in the tooth."

Kathleen is the eldest of the three unmarried vicarage girls, a very beautiful stately creature in her prime.

A few days after the mushroom episode,—if it might be dignified by the name,—Angus came to me looking very dour, and asked me what was to be done about 'the bottles.'

"What bottles?" I asked astonished.

He spat into a flower-bed, "Whisky, sir."

The blow had fallen. Certainly there was a large accumulation of empty whisky bottles, and it was getting a little difficult to know where to put them. This is a quiet country place where everybody knows your business better than yourself. There is also a retired admiral with a telescope. It is sufficient for a couple to be seen walking together twice for an engagement to be announced, or a divorce if one happens to be married, while to get run over, or to fall and cut yourself, is equivalent to being helplessly intoxicated. Therefore everybody has to be extraordinarily careful to hide all the misdoings of which they are innocent, and I frankly own the large accumulation of whisky bottles had worried me, or would have done, had I not known Angus could be depended upon in an emergency.

"There's returning the empties day by day, one at a time," said Angus leaning on his spade, "but life is short, sir, and tongues is long."

I sighed.

"There's hiring a cart and covering it with straw and calling it hay," he went on, "but it wouldn't pass for hay when it was unloaded at the shop."

"No, I suppose not," I said worried. Our High Street is very busy.

"And there's burying 'em in the garden and saying nothing to nobody, but that be wilful waste, seeing there's allowances on returned empties, and there's no knowing how they mightn't come to be dug up by accident, making a scandal, folk saying they'd been drunk on the premises likely enough, and got rid of on the sly. Then it would be spoiling the soil."

I shuffled uneasily with my feet.

"Of course there's wopses," he said, "wopses what has to be caught in bottles with beer and sugar to save the fruit. They won't show when they're hung among the branches now, but it'll look rum when the leaves fall. However sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."

So the bottles were disposed of among the trees, and never had we been freer of wasps. I knew the ingenuity of Angus would have seen a way out by the time the trees were bare.

It was unfortunate that Percy Kearness should seek Angus just after he had hung the last bottle, for he was hot and tired, and a little short-tempered.

"This garden grows more like Paradise each day," said Sophonisba's uncle pleasantly, "I must get you to give my head man tips."

"Racing's a mug's game," returned Angus dourly.

Percy laughed as if he would never stop, "You're a witty fellar," he cried admiringly, "never at a loss!"

Angus grunted.

"And a lucky fellar too, a lovely charming wife, one in a million!"

"How d'yer know that?" demanded Angus.

Percy's eyes flickered, "Far above rubies and that sort of thing," he explained hurriedly, "delightful in one's own wife, but—but—er—rare. But it's not all

of us have the strength of character to be master in our own house."

"Umph!" said Angus.

"Now in the wild and woolly west——"

Angus pounced, "Woolly? Ay sheep is made to be shorn, and wolves to eat them."

"I fear you do not attend church as you should, Angus," returned Percy archly, "or you would know there is a good time coming when the wolf will lie down with the lamb."

"A good time—for the lamb or the wolf?" demanded Angus sardonically.

"Tut, tut. All will be peace——"

"Or pieces, maybe, Mr. Kearness, maybe! Pigs may fly! I shouldn't put my money on the lamb, or calculate to get the mint ready. Seems to me that lambs what go seeking trouble, and wolves that go seeking lambs, mostly get what they're out for."

"You are a pessimist then?"

Angus took up his spade, "Who be you acalling names?"

Sophonisba's uncle stepped back rather hastily, "You mistake me. It was a compliment."

"Then be damned to compliments!" exclaimed Angus violently.

Sophonisba's uncle laughed as if it was all a joke. I saw he was determined Angus should get to know him for what he was, "Certainly," he agreed, "we'll keep 'em for the ladies, eh! Wonderful digestive powers, the fair sex!"

"Huh!" returned Angus.

"How are the slug traps doing?" I asked hastily.

"Oh you are bothered with garden pests? What a pity!" said Percy.

"Garden pests," echoed Angus bitterly, "parasites

and bloodsuckers ! ” He took up his spade, and spat at a flower-bed.

Unfortunately Sophonisba’s uncle happened to be in the way.

“ Quite a character,” he said looking after Angus’ retreating back, “ ‘ My only trust is in God : all else pay cash ’ sort of thing.”

I felt called upon to apologise for Angus, and Percy said graciously that he rather like it than otherwise.

It was the next day that Percy came in for lunch looking rather pleased, “ It seems the good that men do, lives after them,” he observed, “ even thirty years after. I have just had such an odd experience. I was coming up from the village when a rum old buster, country yokel sort of thing, very stiff in the joints, came up to me, and held out his hand. Of course I shook it. Then he held it out again, and I shook it once more.”

“ But who was he ? ” cried Sophonisba, “ Didn’t he say anythin’ ? ”

“ Not a word. He seemed choked with emotion or gratitude, or whatever it was. Obviously somebody I had put under an obligation in the past, lent him money or saved his life,—not that I was given to that sort of thing. Still, it showed poor old Percy had one friend and admirer left in the world. I told him it was a mere nothing, a pleasure, and that he was not to think of repayment. And he just nodded and went away.”

“ But what was he like ? ”

“ He looked as if he might have been a gardener.”

“ A gardener ! ” echoed Sophonisba, and gasped.

“ A chap with a broken nose and a tooth missing top and bottom. Not much to look at, but a warm and grateful heart.”

"It must have been Simmins, grandfather's gardener," said Sophonisba nervously, "don't you remember him ? "

"Oh had we a gardener ? " asked Percy indifferently, "but it doesn't matter, old favours are best forgotten, and the poor old chap was very welcome, as I told him."

Sophonisba began rather hurriedly to talk of her garden-party. We give a big one every year. We do not however send out the invitations till the last moment so as to be sure who can come and who can't. Pansy was unfortunately unable to be present on this occasion.

Sophonisba had never looked more beautiful, the day was perfect, and everybody turned up in their best and gayest. It seemed to me a great success, though one or two of our guests appeared somehow less friendly to me than usual, and others were more so. Once or twice when I was able to catch sight of Sophonisba, I thought her looking worried. Percy was the soul of hospitality, and helped to make the thing go off, but the people left earlier than usual.

Then when I sought Sophonisba in her room to congratulate her upon the great success of her entertainment, I found her crying, and when she wasn't crying she was stamping her foot and saying things.

"Oh Edward," she gasped, "and you can look as if nothin' had happened ! "

"My dearest what do you mean ? "

"Those beastly whisky bottles—" she sobbed.

"The wasp-traps ? " I was startled.

"That's what I called them, and that silly political Mr. Pottle said, "Ha ! Very pleasant, a trap for each wasp, I see ! " And you know Edward you can hardly see the leaves on the trees for them. An' he came

pokin' about with that telescopin' admiral, and looked up and saw them, and said, "Ha! Rare an' refreshin' fruit, I see," and giggled. Then uncle came and he said, "Alas poor old Edward! Naughty, naughty, but these bewildered benedicts, perhaps one can't wonder much after all!" And that silly political Mr. Pottle said one couldn't."

"But what did they all mean?" I asked amazed.

"They meant you had taken to it because of me, an' they didn't really wonder or blame you——"

"Nonsense darling, they were just making jokes, can't you see? It all meant nothing."

"Is it nothing to have one's reputation undermined—oh what's that?" for something had dashed up against the window.

"Only a bird," I said.

"*Only* a bird!" echoed Sophonisba furiously, "listenin' to every word and then scootin' off to Pansy, the little beast!"

She took up my old meerschaum and threw it at it. She missed the bird I am glad to say, but she smashed my most cherished pipe. Of course she bought me a new one,—like the generous dear she is,—and pointed out how much nicer it would be to have a clean one, than one worn to the colour of rich mahogany with age.

The bird went off to Pansy just the same.

By the first possible post I received a large packet from her. It contained a piece of blue-ribbon with her love, which she hoped I would wear, and several alarming looking leaflets on how one left one's wife and eleven children to starve, while one wasted one's earnings at the publichouse, and what a drunkard's inside looked like. Rather a shocking illustration. Then there was the letter itself, begging me to be

warned in time, quite understanding how I came to take to it, and not blaming me in the least ; indeed she was astonished I had delayed so long. At the same time I had my “stake in the county,” had “given hostages to fortune,” and must be brave and make the best of it. She would come down and see me as soon as possible. In the meanwhile I must remember that “*all* marriages weren’t as permanent as they seemed,” and that I had in my own household a man of culture and travel, whose example it might be well to follow. There were several other pages, chiefly about Sophonisba’s uncle, and her own achievements at the ambulance classes, and bitter regret that no real accident has as yet come her way.

I showed the letter to Sophonisba who put it in the fire, and said she would answer it.

“Do you know, dear,” I said amazed, “a most extraordinary idea has come into my head. I believe Pansy thinks I have taken to drink.”

“That silly political Mr. Pottle with his ‘rare and refreshing fruit.’ believes it,” faltered Sophonisba, “Oh Edward why didn’t you bury them ? Of all the rotten ideas trimmin’ trees with whisky bottles ! And I consider uncle had no right to make jokes like that. He ought to have realised they might be misunderstood, an’ the admiral with his telescope trained on us an’ all ! ”

It is said, that since his retirement, the admiral, finding time hang heavy on his hands, examines his neighbours gardens and affairs,—even their bedroom windows,—through his telescope, but I for one do not believe it.

CHAPTER VII

SOME UNFORTUNATE INCIDENTS

“**S**OPHONISBA,” I demanded, “who is the ugliest woman in the county? ‘Ugly enough to frighten crows,’” I quoted, “‘but a dear thing all the same.’”

Sophonisba seemed startled, “That you should ask me that!”

“I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation through the hedge, though I couldn’t see the speakers. They spoke of the husband too; said he was short and fat, but awfully kind-hearted, with romantic ideas and a bit dense.”

“Fat? Short? *Liars!*” exploded Sophonisba.

“It can’t be the Pattersons because they have girls, not ‘two podgy stupid little boys so dreadfully like.’ And they haven’t ‘a fiend of a dog’ either.”

“It isn’t anybody in the neighbourhood at all,” said Sophonisba in rather a furious voice, “Podgy? Stupid? A fiend of a dog? Backbitin’ idiots! It would be some friends of their own.” She began to jump up and down on her chair, “Oh,” she exclaimed in her delightful inconsequent way “if only I had lived in the days when three wishes were the fashion. I’d have been beautiful, and more beautiful and most beautiful. It would have taken the whole three, I bet.”

“Well *you* would not have needed to use the wishes

like that," I said admiringly. I don't think I have mentioned that Sophonisba is very beautiful indeed.

"And I wouldn't have had to put up with people lookin' down their noses at me with a 'good Lord!' expression. I wouldn't have spoiled it by wishin' to be good either an' missin' the fun of bein' beautiful."

"But dear you are good," I exclaimed.

"I'm not," she returned crossly, she always under-values herself, "or if I am, it's only because I'm one of the sort that have to be. If I could have had those three wishes I'd have been no end of a corker just to make up. Oh dear, here's uncle! He's taken too regularly chasin' us about lately. Couldn't you give a hint, and it's nearly six weeks, an' he hasn't said a word about goin'. Hullo uncle! Just wonderin' where you were, jolly of you to come an' find us; we were just goin' to look for you."

"I've been acting the part of the Good Samaritan, feeding the hungry, and so on," explained Percy. No wonder your fowls don't lay if you keep 'em so short, Soapy. I met a poor beast of a chicken wandering about seeking what it might devour, and did my little best for it. As luck would have it, I remembered coming across a great fat worm in a flower-pot, and gave it that. My word, you should have seen the little beggar's gratitude!"

Sophonisba and I looked at each other, helpless in the face of tragedy, "Not Billy," she faltered at length, "oh uncle say it wasn't Billy!"

"The chicken?" he asked astonished, "Do you christen 'em? Don't worms suit it? It seemed to fancy him all right."

"The worm was Billy," I said sadly, "and he was the boy's favourite pet of all. They adored Billy, he is closer to them than a brother; it will break their

hearts, and we did so want their childhood to be happy. This is their first bereavement."

"Good gracious!" gasped Percy, "so Billy is a worm, and I've subscribed to his money-box, the boys implying they could not bear him to be left out. They were always talking of him, I thought he was a boy chum. Well, well, if it isn't tiresome! But we can put another worm in the flower-pot, who's to tell the difference?"

"An' after me bringin' them up not to be deceitful!" wailed Sophonisba. The asparagus bed is the best place to look in. The fattest live there, but Billy was pompous as well as fat, and then the new Billy may lack the same tricks, have a different manner and character. However we had to risk that!

We dug for dear life, fearing the advent of the boys. Percy Kearness looked on and advised us, and was most encouraging.

Then we heard a shout and looked at each other in despair. It was the boys.

"Here come the bereaved, boo-hoo, boo-hoo!" said Percy getting out his handkerchief. He would not take the situation seriously.

"Why is f-f-father diggin' up the s-s-sparragrass?" demanded Edward the Second.

"For his figure my little man, for his figure!" returned Percy.

"Won't Angus mind?" drawled Billium.

I dug on, albeit gloomily. I knew that Angus would mind, and that explanation would be difficult. Angus is so very literal. Our asparagus beds are the pride of his heart and the envy of our neighbours. It is of them he thinks first thing in the morning and late at night.

"We can say the fowls got out," whispered Sophon-

isba encouragingly to me. "Probably they did for all we know. Oh Edward!" We had both seen Billy the Second at the same instant. She carelessly dropped her handkerchief over him, and also,—carelessly,—dropped her handkerchief into the flower-pot.

"How tiresome for Billy," she said to Edward the Second, "I've dropped my handkerchief into his house." She took it out as she spoke. "I do hope he isn't annoyed." To me she whispered, "Do you think they will notice he has quite a different expression?"

"W-w-what's B-B-Billy doin' here anyway?" demanded Edward Junior, "He looks humpy 'bout somethin'."

"Oh I thought he might like to watch his friends," returned Sophonisba easily, patting down some thin worms into place. She is never at a loss in an emergency.

"Oh B-B-Billy's an a-a-ass," said Edward the Second to our amazement, "he won't take an interest in anythin', he w-w-won't."

"Worms is silly," drawled Billium softly, "I votes we give him to the hens and see which get the biggest piece." And like a flash they had gone,—the unhappy Billy with them.

"Hard luck being swallowed twice; even Jonah stopped short of that," said Percy, mixed in his allusion as he often was.

Sophonisba and I merely gazed at each other.

"Oh well," she said recovering first as usual, "I was young once myself, I suppose, though never a boy. Oh pat it down more, dear, and pick up the stalks. You know what Angus is."

I obeyed sighing. I knew what Angus was. He might not say much, but he would look a lot, and be perfectly in the right as usual, and we had agonised in vain as it turned out.

The boys waved to us from a distance.

"All is over," said Percy taking off his hat, "R.I.P."

On the way to the house, Sophonisba and I came face to face with the chicken who had caused the trouble. It looked at us indignantly, and Sophonisba glared back at it. "To be treated anyhow by one's own fowls!" she objected bitterly, then she added, "but it was very kind and thoughtful of uncle, and shows that he really has a generous nature."

"I'm afraid the worm might not think it kind and thoughtful," I murmured.

At that moment Billium descended upon us, holding the dangling Billy, "we've been chasin' that silly chicken to give it a treat," he said, "Now, Eddy, quick!"

Edward the Second cornered the chicken rather skilfully, "N-N-Now Billium!"

Billium threw Billy right in front of the chicken. When I opened my eyes, boys and Billy had disappeared. The chicken was however eyeing me expectantly.

"I shall call it Oliver Twist," said Sophonisba looking at it distastefully.

"Then it did?" I asked.

"Rather! In one go! Pampered, that's what they are, takin' advantage of us for all they're worth. Why doesn't it lay eggs? I ask you that!" She glared at the defaulter who attempted to crow in her face.

"Perhaps it isn't the kind which can," I ventured.

"Won't, not can't," she returned, "it's all the same—just obstinacy! I'm fed up with fowls that won't lay whatever you do for them. Lets go an' look at the new pigs. There's sense in pigs, an' bacon an' pork-pies."

We found the boys admiring the latest family, "father, do you see that f-f-fat little p-p-pink p-p-pig in the corner?" asked Edward the Second.

I said what a fat jolly little chap he was.

"We're goin' to call him Uncle P-P-Percy, cos of Uncle f-f-fittin' so t-t-tight in his clothes."

"Oh no," I cried aghast, "he would not like it. It would be an insult."

"What would?" asked the voice of Percy himself.

I looked helplessly at Sophonisba who proceeded to walk rapidly away. One cannot stop Edward the Second; he merely starts all over again; stammerers have that habit, I notice; not of course that the child actually stammers.

"We was g-g-goin' to call the f-f-fat one, Uncle P-P-Percy after you," explained the boy at once, "cos it f-f-fits so t-t-tight in it's s-s-skin, but father he said, it would be an-n-n'insult to the p-p-pig."

I went after Sophonisba, but Percy's laugh followed us. He had taken the thing in good part, it seemed.

"He is a dear," cried Sophonisba, "I do hope he will stay the full six weeks!"

As a matter of fact he was still with us some six months later, and there was no talk of his departure. It was he who told me not to worry when rather a trying thing happened.

One morning Sophonisba beckoned me into the morning-room, and shutting the door, said quickly, "Oh Edward what were you doin' in the garden by moonlight last night about twelve o'clock?"

"Fixing up the slug-traps," I returned, "I suddenly thought of them, and they were almost full this morning, Sophonisba."

"As if this was a time to talk of slugs, and as if it

mattered whether they were full or not. Oh Edward, if you could only have established an alias-thing——”

“Alibi?” I suggested staring, “but dearest, why?”

“That beastly old telescopin’ admiral!” She burst into tears.

“I don’t understand,” I exclaimed, “what has he to do with the slug-traps?”

“Everythin’ to do with it! How thankful his poor wife must be that he is a widower, always up when other people are in bed, and in bed when other people are up! An’ him with the telescope trained on the garden, an’ countin’ the times——”

I soothed her as best I could, and begged her to explain, “A man,” she gulped, “a not very tall, not very slim man, chasin’ a woman round the gooseberry bushes an’ kissin’ her! Oh Edward!”

“But you were in the house,” I said consolingly, “so it wasn’t us. It must have been his imagination.”

“He doesn’t have imagination,” wailed Sophonisba, “he says it isn’t necessary in Hill Land. He had counted her bein’ caught seven times, then he got a fly in his eye, and when he got it out, the moon had gone in and he was mad as a hatter, but continued to watch all the same. And after the whisky bottles——” she paused choking.

I was utterly bewildered. I could not see what the whisky bottles had to do with it, and said so.

“They have everythin’ to do with it. Oh Edward dearest, what made you think of the slug traps last night of all nights. You can never deny bein’ there—you can never tell lies truthfully.”

“Good God,” I gasped, “they can’t think it was me!”

“It is exactly what they do think, and don’t scruple to say either, not to me of course. An’ Edward they

are sayin' they don't wonder at it, and don't really blame you. Oh it makes me wild ! ”

“ But who do they think the woman was ? ” I demanded, “ have they no sense ? How could I be going on like that when you were in the house. ”

“ They think you were going on like that just because I *was* in the house ! ”

“ Then they ought to be shot ! ” I exploded wrathfully.

“ Darlin', I never doubted you for a moment, it wasn't that, only you *were* out an awfully long time, weren't you ? and you've often said how romantic the gooseberry bushes looked by moonlight, and of course there're lots that wouldn't mind lettin' you catch 'em. Then that silly political Mr. Pottle and the admiral have had their heads together all day, and are sayin' they knew it couldn't last, and you were bound to 'break out in the end, and that when you did, it would be a break worth talkin' about,—you could bet on that.' And then there's Pansy ; she's bound to turn up with her beastly, ' I told you so ! ' Oh things haven't been at all the same lately, I can't think what's makin' all the difference. ”

I had noticed a difference myself but had not liked to mention it. It was not one you could get to the roots of.

“ I don't care what they say about me, ” I said unhappily, “ as long as they leave you alone, Sophonisba. ”

“ But I'd a jolly sight rather they were sayin' it was me who was carryin' on and makin' you look silly, than me who was gettin' left, ” retorted Sophonisba, “ if we go about together same as usual, people will say I'm the sort to swallow anythin', and don't much care what I put up with now I've got one. ”

I took the problem to Angus.

“Angus,” I said in a whisper, “people are saying that Moss End harbours a drunkard and a midnight—er—philanderer.”

“They’re none so far out,” he returned.

I was thunderstruck. Even Angus was against me. I was too upset to continue the conversation, and wandered round the garden wondering how I could have thought it the Garden of Eden.

“Hullo,” said Percy coming across me and taking my arm, “you look a bit off colour. Liver?”

“No” I sighed, “gossip, scandal, Kearness. They say I drink, and chase women round gooseberry bushes in the middle of the night.”

“And don’t you?” he asked.

I pulled my arm away, “even you—” I began hotly.

“I was joking, old fellow. Of course I don’t believe a word of it. Gay old benedict, what! Put us modest bachelors to the blush every time. Who is the gel? Mum’s the word, you can trust poor old Percy. I won’t give you away, old son. Who’s the gel?” He dug me in the ribs and laughed uproariously.

Then he stopped suddenly, noting my very real annoyance, and said how sorry he was, and that nothing would induce him to believe such a libel, “Hanged if I wouldn’t believe it of myself first!” he said warmly, and I must say his sympathy helped me. As for the admiral and his telescope, it was quite refreshing to hear Percy on the subject. He had learned so many new words in his travels. “The old blighter,” he added wrathfully, “the interferin’ old blighter, why in the name of goodness train it on the gooseberry bushes?”

Then he left me, and I turned round, and suddenly Pansy burst through the gate at me.

“ Oh Edward why gooseberry bushes ? ” she exclaimed, “ Why choose a moonlight night ? ”

I saw there was nothing for it but endurance.

“ *All men show the old Adam sooner or later,* ” she stated positively, “ and it’s much more serious when it’s later. Don’t think I am blaming you, I am not. I know what you have had to put up with, how nobly you have endured, but why break out,—break down,—I mean, now ? Was it twenty-seven times or seventy he saw her let you catch her ? ”

“ You’d better ask him,” I returned stiffly, “ he’s much more up in the affair than I. Why only seventy ? Why not seven hundred while we are at it ? ” I may as well own I was losing my temper.

“ Seven hundred ! Oh Edward ! And you kissed her each time you caught her ! ”

“ Thanks for the information,” I retorted, “ and all this within an hour or so of moonlight ! Seven hundred pursuits, seven hundred catchings, seven hundred kisses ! I mayn’t be keen on sums, but it seems to me the performance would have taken the best part of a week, without allowing any intervals for refreshments. But possibly I am not supposed to need them.”

“ Dear, don’t be so silly,” she patted my hand, “ I have not come to blame, I have come to help. Does Sophonisba know ? ”

“ She knows what fools say, and treats them with the contempt they deserve.”

“ So that’s her attitude,” said Pansy thoughtfully, “ I wondered which she would take. And Mr. Kearness ? ”

“ He thinks like Sophonisba.”

“ Because he is so noble, so full of ideals,” said Pansy in a hushed voice, “ but you are no hero of romance, Edward, but ordinary flesh and blood—which reminds

me, you are getting dreadfully fat. I do wish you would be more careful with your diet. So unfortunate with your height. Now was it Mrs. Gardeiner ? ”

“ Was who Mrs. Gardeiner ? ”

“ The gooseberry woman ? ”

“ You had better ask her.”

“ Oh Edward you are so close ! It’s always a bad sign. Where is Mr. Kearness ? He seemed so helpful, such a thorough man of the world.” She looked round eagerly.

I was surprised to catch a glimpse of Percy rapidly disappearing.

Then Sophonisba came and I gave a sigh of relief. She would deal with Pansy. She at once proceeded to do so.

“ I can guess what you’ve come about,” she said shortly, “ well, if you want to know, Pansy, the woman was me—so there ! ”

I gasped.

“ Then who was the man ? ” almost shrieked my sister-in-law.

CHAPTER VIII

ENDEAVOURS TO SPEED THE PARTING GUEST

AT luncheon the other day, Edward the Second, who is of an enquiring turn of mind, threw a bombshell into our midst.

“Why does Uncle P-P-Percy k-k-kiss J-J-Jane, an’ call her d-d-didums ?” he demanded.

There was a rather horrible silence. I was thankful to remember that Jane had already left the room.

“What me !” exclaimed Sophonisba’s uncle in amazement, and added, “which is Jane ?”

“The one that says ‘Go hon with your games, now do !’” drawled Billium.

“Jane who w-w-waits,” went on Edward the Second. “Emily w-w-went, an’ J-J-Jane came.”

Sophonisba and I said nothing. It was the accused himself who changed the subject, and with an ease that astonished me.

While he was resting upstairs, Sophonisba and I snatched a few moments to be alone together in our own house. “No wonder the serpents that came out of the bag had uncle-faces,” she said gloomily, “we’ve warmed a viper on the hearth, an’ he’s disorganisin’ the best parlourmaid we ever had. I tell you we can’t get rid of Jane. Edward, we must get rid of uncle.”

It occurred to me it might be easier said than done, and I murmured as much.

“But it’s *got* to be done,” declared Sophonisba

firmly, "and you Edward, must do it. Do you want Jane put down to you as well as the bottles an' the gooseberry-woman? It's nine months since he came, and he's settled down for life, and is slowly, but surely, underminin' our reputation. Anybody but Pansy might have seen from the first that he was little better than an adventurer!"

I sighed, for it had always come to this: when Sophonisba said he was all right, Pansy said he was all wrong, but neither had agreed as to his "rightness" or "wrongness" at the same time.

"An' him spoilin' the dear boys' faith in human nature. Can you sit an' see all their beautiful trust destroyed, an' do nothin'?"

I was alarmed, and asked her what she meant.

"First shillins, then sixpences, then threepences like a beastly collection, and now pennies and half-pennies. Next I suppose it will be trouser-buttons an' lozenges. An' him borrowin' your money all the time because he came away in too great a hurry to remember his cheque-book. Millionaire indeed! Now Edward, just tell him to clear out and be done with it."

"But he's your uncle," I hesitated.

"Says he is; he may be no more mine than yours. The sort of hints he would take are brickbats in the eye, and then he'd make some excuse or other, come back for plaster or somethin', and forget to leave. Our home is ruined, our happiness is ruined, our reputation is ruined; now the boys are bein' ruined, and still you do nothin'! If it had been Gertrude,—we'll have to give her notice in any case, and it would have been an excuse,—but Jane, the most invaluable treasure we possess! And his 'which is Jane?' Edward! As if it might have been any, or all. An' him drinkin' an' eatin' like a—like a whale all the time! When I

think of the lot we've put into that man, an' the little we've got out,—except borrowin's,—it makes me hoppin' mad. Out he's got to go an' that's flat."

She paused for breath.

I sat in miserable silence. I have never looked down the cannon's mouth, or faced an oncoming bayonet, but either would have been trifles compared to telling an uncle who had obviously no intention of doing anything of the sort, that he must go. The man might have his faults, possibly had, as have we all, but he was sincerely attached to us and the boys, and it would break his heart to leave us. If he hadn't any money after all, then it would be quite impossible to turn him out into the ditch so to speak.

"I can't," I said at length, "and he wouldn't go anyway."

"He would—with a boot behind him."

"Oh Sophonisba!" I was deeply shocked.

"Well I didn't mean that exactly, it would require a giant to do it, an' make too much talk. We've got to avoid talk. He must go of his own accord,—easily, naturally. We don't want any more scandal."

"Indeed we don't," I agreed feelingly.

"Goin' out of his way to make a fool of Pansy right off should have shown us what he was, an' after the gardener's wife an' all,—not that he would run away with Pansy, worse luck! It isn't as if Angus and Dorothea haven't as good as said all the time that he was no good, for they have, and they always turn out right in the end, an' then Satan warned us right off—dear little fellow! So he's got to go, and go without makin' a bother. Well, that's settled." She walked out of the room with a great air of relief.

I however felt none of the relief, "Sophonisba," I called softly after her, "what if he won't?"

“ Oh Edward, what a silly question ! You’ve got to see he does. Are you master in this house, or aren’t you ? ”

“ Of course if you put it like that,” I sighed, for I have always thought it very nice of Sophonisba to let me be so much master in my own house.

“ You said you would go through fire and water for my sake, and now you kick at uncles—or rather don’t ! He’s comin’ now, so just fix it up,” and she vanished swiftly.

I got in a fuss at once. Never had such an unpleasant task been mine. It was like the hangman’s footsteps getting nearer all the time, and I’d have almost as soon be hanged, as be so inhospitable and unkind in my own house.

“ Hullo,” said Percy looking me up and down, “ you look a bit depressed, old son ! Been catching it from the missus, eh ? Not the gooseberry bushes again ? Never make anything so pleasant as a woman that attracts you, into anything so unpleasant as a wife. Follow poor old Percy’s rule, take ’em all unto your heart but none into the church.” He laughed as if such things were a joke. He could forget Jane and the gardener’s wife easier than I could.

I think he saw I did not care for such “ humour.”

“ You see, old man,” he went on, “ you spell ’em Woman, with an ‘ a ’ and a capital W, and I spell ’em with a little ‘ w,’ an’ an ‘ e,’ an’ bad’s the best of ’em, thank goodness ! Haven’t much use for the other sort myself. Virtuous women are so infernally—er—virtuous.”

“ Seeing that this household is composed of such infernal women, “ I said very stiffly indeed, “ hadn’t you better—” It was proving easier than I anticipated.

But he was before me. “ Take example while I

may ? ” he concluded solemnly, laying his hand on my shoulder, “ Dear old fellow, right as usual. I’m a frivolous wastrel, alas ! have I ever denied it ? but you won’t find Percy Kearness bad at heart. Your example, Edward, the silent strong man, so kind, and yet so firm, has done more for me than you can ever know, and Sophonisba—ah what hasn’t Sophonisba done for me ! What a niece, what a wife ! That alone should knit us together. Not many are so blessed. I’ve got so fond of you both, and of those dear smart boys, like my own daughter, my own sons, they are, and you, Edward, closer than a brother, far, far closer. Poor old William is almost ‘ not quite,’ you know, and Abimelech was ‘ *quite* quite.’ I’m wrapped up in you all, and that’s a fact. If you were removed from my life the heart would go out of poor old Percy. I’ve been one of the lonely beggars, no love, no home, and you’ve given me both. God bless you ! ” He wrung my hand.

“ Not at all,” I said miserably.

“ You so favoured of fortune, try and realise what it is to be without a true home, without wife, children, just a tramp on life’s Highway.”

I felt most horribly sorry for Sophonisba’s uncle.

“ Er—why not marry ? ” I suggested hopefully. Then,—at least so I supposed,—he would live in his own house.

“ You forget Hermione,” he said huskily, “ with me to love once was to love for ever. I never got over it ; I never shall now. She married a politician, poor child.”

“ I thought she married a peer ? ” I said quickly.

“ A political peer,” he explained, “ the worst brand. But if she has gone from me for ever, I have you and my dear, dear, niece left.”

“ Yes, but——”

“ My life has been like a desert,” he went on, “ but thanks to you, I have found an oasis.” He wrung my hand again.

I could only sigh rather helplessly.

“ Of course it can’t be for long,” he began.

I pricked up my ears.

“ No, I must be moving on only too soon. I must communicate with my secretary, and be worried again with business affairs. I’ve been too long the locust-eater.” He sighed.

I realised that he meant “ lotus,” but made no comment.

“ Perhaps I’ve been a fool. The other did me down rather badly, cleared with my other fortune, what if this chap clears with the last ! ” He seemed suddenly anxious, “ I should have thought of that before. Is it right to put such a vast temptation in his way ? Personally, it’s the one thing I never could resist. I will write to-night, and you must forgive me if I have to go almost without notice.”

I said we would.

“ It’s not as if I shan’t come back again to the only home I’ve ever known,”

“ But we must not be selfish,” I said desperately, “ we realise you have other claims. We cannot allow the sacrifice.”

“ No sacrifice but a pleasure,” he returned so firmly that I did not like to say it was beginning to be all sacrifice and no pleasure.

“ Well, he’s going,” I said thankfully to Sophonisba, “ then we will return to the garden of Eden, you and I, Sophonisba.”

“ When ? To-day ? To-morrow ? ”

“ Dearest, he’s got to pack, to look up trains. He did not say the actual day.”

“ You should have made him say the day and stick to it. His packin’ won’t take him long, and I must say I shall be thankful to have that disgraceful bag off the premises. One wonders what is goin’ to come out of it next ! ” She shuddered.

“ He’ll soon be gone now,” I returned, “ it’s not as if he hasn’t stated his intention of going.”

“ What if he’s always goin’, goin’, an’ never gone ? ” she demanded, “ Oh Edward, I don’t feel we’re rid of him yet ! ”

We weren’t. At the end of another month he was almost more with us than ever, and his intention of departing seemed quite to have slipped his memory. Once or twice however, he did go so far as to say he was waiting to hear from his secretary, and we awaited that letter far more eagerly than he did, I fancy.

CHAPTER IX

HOW RICHES TAKE TO THEMSELVES WINGS

SOPHONISBA'S uncle is extremely punctual at breakfast as well as at all other meals. Sophonisba and I—I regret to have to state—are not as punctual at the first meal of the day as we should be, and usually arrive down after Percy has started. It is hardly polite, I suppose, but uncle,—as I try to remember to call him,—is kind enough to say we are to do as we like in our own house, and not consider him in any way.

When we came down the other morning no earlier than usual, we were astonished to find he had not started, but was instead pacing up and down in a very distressed fashion, a letter crushed in one hand, the other pressed to his forehead.

“What shall I do! How shall I tell them!” he kept murmuring over and over again, seemingly quite unconscious of our presence, though we had not entered noiselessly, and were in his direct line of vision. “What will become of me!” He groaned, sank limply into a chair, and shuddered.

The boys gazed at him with wide-open eyes, and Edward the Second observed, “I do like Uncle P-P-Percy. He is so f-f-funny.”

“An’ so fat,” concluded Billium in his soft engaging drawl.

Percy seemed as unconscious of their remarks as he was of everything but his own trouble.

“What has happened?” asked Sophonisba, and lifting up the cover of the bacon-dish observed, “Well it’s still quite hot, thank goodness!”

Percy seemed hurt that she could stop to consider the bacon at such a time. “Is that you?” he asked with a start, “I hardly seem able to take notice or anything. I never suspected such a catastrophe, never!”

“Oh, has there been a catastrophe?” asked Sophonisba sitting down in her place and helping herself liberally to bacon, “Do come and have it while it’s hot, Edward dear.”

Percy gave another groan, “A catastrophe!” he echoed, “I should think so!” He exhibited a crushed ball of paper in his hand that told one little or nothing. It might have been a letter of the most dire importance, or it might have been merely a circular or a bill.

“The worst of catastrophes,” he added. With a shudder he dropped the crushed paper into the fire. It flared, and was gone. “There goes my faith in human nature, my fortune, my all!” he exclaimed dramatically.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Sophonisba,—reluctantly laying down her knife and fork, “You don’t say so!” She stared hard at the fire. I could see she was sorry her uncle had burned the fatal letter, that she would have liked to read it herself. After all, we could only get a second-hand version now. We should have to take his word for everything. Sophonisba has often said what a lot of liars there are in the world, and it seemed to me she looked at Percy more in suspicion and anger than in sympathy. “What’s up?” she concluded.

“I am. Up a gum-tree, up the spout—anything you like,” he answered gloomily. “The fruits of thirty years—all, all, vanished like smoke! And he also glared at the fire. Then he put his hand to his forehead and groaned again.

“Isn’t uncle f-f-funny when he a-a-acts?” demanded Edward the Second, “it’s like the p-p-pantomime.”

I hushed my son and heir. He giggled, and repeated the remark, and Sophonisba said :

“There are pantomimes and pantomimes, Edward the Second, and some aren’t funny, they only pretend to be, an’ anyway little boys were meant to be seen and not heard.” Then she turned to Percy and asked him rather impatiently to state exactly what had happened. “I don’t understand,” she added.

“How should you, my dear child? You know nothing of baseness, of swindlers and so on. My secretary and manager has gone—that’s all——”

“Gone where?” asked Sophonisba staring.

“To the Place where swindlers, liars, suicides, profligates, hypocrites, deceivers and sinners generally go—to where he and I can never meet again so that I can tell him what I think of him.”

“Well, you never know,” said Sophonisba, “daresay it’ll be quite different to what we expect, in spite of the poor pater. What’s he done?”

“Taken my money with him—at least it has melted into thin air,” lamented Percy pathetically, “I shall never see it again either.”

“Has he written to say where he is an’ all that?” asked Sophonisba.

Percy looked annoyed. “I told you he was dead.”

“So you did. Beg pardon. But the news came in the letter?”

"That was from my solicitors. The brute has been going in for systematic embezzling for years——"

"Just like a solicitor!" broke in Sophonisba.

Again Percy looked annoyed, "Not my solicitor, he is a very noble sort of man——"

"Then why is he a solicitor? What does he make out of it?" asked Sophonisba, her mouth wide open.

"It's my secretary that has done the embezzling. He managed all my concerns, it was only too fatally easy, having my perfect trust and power of attorney as he had. He's been playing ducks and drakes with my money for years, and now he's lost every sixpence and shot himself—blown his brains out."

"Fancy blowin' out one's brains," gasped Sophonisba, "What a show-up it would be for some people!"

"Perkins!—that was his name,—wouldn't be a show-up in that sense. He wasn't devoid. He had enough to collar the dibs, but not enough to keep 'em. And here am I, badly left, and Perkins beyond the reach of pursuit or earthly vengeance. All is over!" He fell forward, seemed indeed on the verge of fainting.

"The brandy is finished," said Sophonisba rather sharply looking up from her second helping of bacon, "the fresh lot does not come in till to-morrow."

Percy came round I am glad to say. He staggered to his feet, "Where am I? Who am I?" he demanded hysterically.

The boys giggled, and again I heard the word "pantomime."

I got the whisky bottle.

"Ah now I remember everything," he cried after he had taken a drink to pull himself together, "I am a beggar, a beggar. Do you hear? I who have owned millions, own nothing but the clothes I stand up in!"

He was standing up in some of mine, and, strictly

speaking, did not own them either, but that was a detail.

"I am here on false pretences," he cried fiercely, "a pauper, a discredit! Turn me into the ditch and let me die!" He sank moaning on the couch.

"There won't be any bacon," said Sophonisba looking up.

"Is this a time to talk of bacon?" he demanded, hurt. "Don't you understand? I am ruined!" He lay on his face and kicked wildly. It was a very painful sight. I did not know what to do or say, and Sophonisba was occupied in looking after the affairs of the table.

Edward the Second put his hand over his mouth, but could not hide all sounds. Billium did not try to.

"I came to share my millions with you," went on the unhappy man, turning face upwards, "it was all I had left to live for. I came to make you happy, to do you credit. Instead, what am I?"

"Our Uncle P-P-Percy who is f-f-funny—" began Edward the Second as promptly as he could.

"Spoken like a warm-hearted noble little man! But wrong, my dear little fellow, wrong! That isn't the right answer. A beggar has no right to be an uncle, or alive. No right to hospitality, to love, or shelter!" His voice broke.

"What tosh," said Sophonisba looking very uncomfortable, "an' there's some left." She took off the bacon-cover and regarded what was left thoughtfully. Then she rang for some more to be done.

Percy stood swaying on his feet, "I must go," he stated positively, "Give me my umbrella." I think he had forgotten in his emotion that he had not brought one, and been in the habit of borrowing mine.

"It's not r-r-rainin' " said Edward the Second.

Percy took no notice, "And my raincoat," he added.

I sighed. I had been looking forward to wearing that raincoat sooner or later. There wasn't one like it in the neighbourhood.

"Then I will get them myself," said Percy with dignified reproof as no one ran to do his bidding, "once I had a man constantly within sight and hail, compelled to do his lightest bidding, but times are changed, it seems, and I have come down to this!" He waved his hand disparagingly round our handsome dining-room.

"You might have come down to worse," retorted Sophonisba, her pride of possession hurt.

"My dear you mistake me. I was speaking metaphorically."

"I only learned French at school," said Sophonisba shortly, "and I never got beyond 'Have you the pen of my sister?' 'No, but I have the wife of your gardener—' Oh gracious I didn't mean that! My memory was always so rotten they had to give up teachin' me anythin'" she concluded in some confusion.

"How fortunate," said Percy staring hard at her with his strange light eyes, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and the greater the knowledge, the greater the danger. You have run few risks, dear Soapy. The French language can be a trifle risky I have heard. But farewell, a long farewell, I must go. Think of me now and then when vespers chime, or whatever it is they *do* do."

He got a step nearer the door.

I looked at Sophonisba. Sophonisba looked at me. We said nothing, but I imagine we both thought a lot. We were very sorry for the unlucky man and his misfortunes, but he had already been a lifetime with us, and

had seemed likely to be another. We really were sorry, but we wanted him so dreadfully to go and let us have our own house again, and he had never been nearer it. If we stopped him now, some presentiment told us he might never be so near it again. So we did not try to stop him. We thought at his age he would know his own business best. If he had decided it was better that he should go, well, we were ready to yield to his judgment and allow that he knew best.

“When the moon sheds it’s beauty upon you, think of one who loved you well, but went forth in poverty and rags,” he continued.

I was not quite pleased that he should allude to my best clothes in such a fashion. “Of course—” I began, and thrust my hand in my pocket. I would write him a cheque. It should be big enough to take him to the “wild and woolly west” of which he spoke so often, but not big enough to bring him back. After all, he had found our civilisation irksome and said so.

He seemed to guess my intention. “Not a penny,” he said, to my amazement, for I had not hitherto found him averse to anything of the sort. Indeed it was rather I who had—now and then—been perhaps a trifle averse. After all my money was for Sophonisba and our boys.

“Not a penny,” he repeated, “Do you think I will take money from you?”

I could not help remembering how readily he had done so, but I begged his pardon, perhaps with relief.

“Edward you must not hurt his pride,” said Sophonisba firmly, “Uncle is clever and independent. He will just go and make another fortune.”

Percy shook his head doubtfully.

“Oh yes you will,” she insisted, “People do, once

they get right away from this silly old country. I'm glad you are gettin' away."

He had not however got away yet, as I could not but remember.

"There's the fare," I began, "a mere loan——"

"Do you think the benefactor can endure to become the benefitted?" he interrupted angrily, "I came here to share my all with you. I will not become an object of charity instead of a welcome guest."

"There's no question of——" I began. Then I paused. I had so nearly said, "welcome guest." "No question of that sort of thing," I murmured, "It would be a privilege. Shall I look out the steamers?"

"No steamer will catch up my secretary," he said regretfully, "he is gone—beyond my reach."

"Well there's no harm makin' sure," said Sophonisba, "one never knows. Rum things happen in this world, an' in the next! Ask the poor pater."

Percy did not seem to hear her. "I shall go out into the cold hard world just as I am," he announced with determination. And he looked determined enough for anything. I could not but feel he would have his own way in the end.

Sophonisba looked at his carpet slippers, or rather at mine. I think she thought them inadequate for a journey across the world, and that perhaps they might give rise to talk, but she said nothing. Merely helped herself to some more. She hates things to get cold and spoiled, and never lets them if she can help it.

"It's quite mild for the time of the year," I found myself murmuring.

"Heat or cold, it's all the same now," returned uncle, "Which is the nearest workhouse? The one next the admiral's?"

I looked miserably at Sophonisba. Uncle would go

there till we had to ask him to return. How the neighbours would talk ! What brutes we should look—and feel !

Sophonisba looked miserably back at me. She also saw the difficulty.

“Of course if you have no money—” she began.

He did not allow her to finish. “I have money,” he said haughtily, drawing himself up as far as he would go, “not what I once had perhaps, but enough for pauper-uncles.”

With great difficulty—for my new suit fitted him much tighter than one would have believed possible without disaster, though I had asked the tailor to make it loose for me, and doubtless it would have been easy enough on its rightful owner—he got his hands into his pockets, and exhibited threepence. “Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,” he quoted cynically. “Two-pence for a bed, a penny for a bun. Then the workhouse for the rest of my days. Thank goodness it is close enough. I shall still be able to look upon my dear ones as they drive past in their careless luxury.” He took two steps to the door.

Sophonisba’s eyes signalled to me. They said, “The neighbours !”

I took uncle’s arm and led him to the table, and Sophonisba gave him the remains of the bacon. “Nonsense,” she said briskly, adding with great determination, “It will never come to the workhouse, so don’t you think it ! Why, you’ll make a livin’ as easy as easy !”

“All the heart has gone out of me,” he groaned.

“All the better ! One doesn’t want a heart for makin’ a livin’,—the less the better. One wants brains, an’ no silly scruples. I’m sure you are all right in that way. You didn’t blow yours out.”

"No, but I might anytime."

"Oh uncle d-d-do!" implored Edward the Second excitedly, "It would be f-f-funny. Are brains p-p-pink?"

"There's no hurry about doin' anythin' for a day or two," broke in Sophonisba quickly.

He shook his head sadly, finished his breakfast, and went upstairs to lie down and recover from it—from the shock, I mean.

Sophonisba and I looked at each other, and we also shook our heads sadly.

"If he *would* blow them out," said Sophonisba longingly, "but he won't. Perhaps it would be too much of a show-up for him. O dear, how annoyin'! Dead uncles don't matter whatever they've been, but live ones do—dreadfully. Goin', goin', an' never gone! I told you so!"

"He said he must let himself be over-persuaded," I sighed.

Sophonisba, struck by a sudden thought, ran out of the room and in again, "I thought so," she exclaimed, "There wasn't a letter for him at all, only a circular-thing! The old hypocrite! He's done us down nicely! Of course he never had a fortune to lose and we're nicely in the soup, for we'll never get rid of him now. It's all a plant. If we turn him out,—an' it will have to be by force,—what will happen?"

"I don't know," I returned helplessly.

"I only wish I didn't! He'll go straight to the workhouse, cryin' on the road, an' tellin' everybody! Then people will say we took him in because he was rich, fleeced him, an' turned him out to starve. *He* will help the impression for all he's worth. He knows he's got us bottled right enough, that we daren't quarrel with him if we want to keep our characters—or at

least what there's left. He's here for life, Edward, and how you could go an' make a mess of our lives like this I can't think. If we keep him, our home an' happiness is ruined, an' Jane uncertain. If we force him to go, the place will grow too hot for us to live in. The telescopin' admiral can see the workhouse door. Everybody knows he took the house on the top of the hill looking' down on us all, just to exercise his beastly old telescope like other people have to exercise their horses an' dogs! Now mark my words, Edward, Uncle will say no more about goin' but just settle down more than ever!"

Sophonisba proved right as usual.

CHAPTER X

PANSY AS EVICTOR

I GOT a letter from Pansy a few days later. She said she had heard all about it, that it was utterly disgraceful, and just what she had expected and prophesied, and she was coming down to see about it. "You might have known," she concluded, "that *all* surprises sprung on one by relations are bound to be unpleasant ones." Then she went on to the history of her ambulance-class triumphs, and her certificate.

"The shinin' light is comin' down like a wolf on the fold," said Sophonisba, "well for once even Pansy is welcome. Let her out Uncle, and I'm her friend for life—or at least till she does somethin' annoyin', which mayn't be for a week or so."

"Oh Edward, why wouldn't you be warned in time," were Pansy's first words to me, "Didn't I tell you he was a swindler? Losing his money like that! Disgusting! Always at the mercy of your own weakness, and other people's chicanery. Look at your fowls! They haven't laid! I know it!"

They hadn't. I said nothing.

"Then your pigs, if it wasn't for Sophonisba, who has sense thank goodness, when the butcher comes for them, you would beg him not to. Pigs or poultry, or people calling themselves uncles, it's all the same. They are making you ridiculous all the time.

Leave me to deal with this scoundrel, Edward. I will soon settle him, I promise you that ! ”

“ I hope you will be able to keep your promise, Pansy,” I retorted with some spirit.

“ All I do ask is, that once I’ve got rid of him, you won’t run after him and insist on his coming back.”

“ I can give my promise for yours.”

“ I would have come before, but they could not spare me at the classes. The doctor looks upon me as his right hand. I was publicly—and on the platform—complimented on my ability. James has got the certificate in his study, and a new photograph in nurse’s uniform. Quite one of my most successful. James says he has never seen me look better in anything. He’s got it in a silver frame. If only they would let us have real accidents instead of those silly dummies. What’s the sense of an accident without blood ? A tiresome man fell down in front of a motor-bus the other day, and I thought it was all over him—over with him, I mean, and that I could prove what metal I was made of at last.”

“ And didn’t you ? ”

“ Of course I did—I mean would have, but the wretched creature just got up and walked away as if nothing had happened, and when I asked if I might feel him all over, as I was sure something or other *must* be broken, he was most offensive, most ! ” Her face reddened.

“ Indeed ! ” I said shocked.

“ Well, take me to this person Edward, and let’s get it over and done with.” We entered the hall as she spoke.

“ But you won’t want me ? ” I exclaimed aghast.

“ I shall require you as a witness,” she returned sternly, “ and you seem to forget, Edward, that James

is very particular, and that this impostor is a bachelor—or says he is. If you can brush the gardener's wife so lightly aside, I can't."

How sick I had got of the very sound of the gardener's wife !

"Ah here he is,—most fortunate !" For Sophonisba's uncle was coming down the stairs.

Pansy's mouth set, and a gleam came into her eyes. Her expression should have warned anybody ; it would intimidate a Turk, but Percy seemed to notice nothing, only to be overcome with joy and respectful emotion at sight of her.

He came hurrying down, his hands outstretched in welcome, "Ah, Hermione !" he cried.

He had no time to note her freezing displeasure, for in his haste he had slipped down the last few steps, and lay groaning in great pain.

"An accident !" cried Pansy, and at once became the successful nurse, "possibly a bad case !"

Bravely Sophonisba's uncle tried to hide his great suffering. "It is nothing," he said faintly, "dear lady do not trouble, I cannot have you distressed. It is only a broken ankle, I think—a-h-h !" He could no longer hide what he was enduring.

Pansy stooped over him. "Most critical thing, a broken ankle," she cried, and there was something not unlike elation in her tones, "but leave me to see to everything, Edward. He must be got upstairs ; in the meanwhile—" she dashed to the writing-table and scribbled off a telegram, "have that taken at once."

I took it, and rang the bell. I supposed she was wiring for appliances or so on, but was astonished to read, "*Immediately send nurse's uniform by special messenger.*" I realised that Sophonisba's uncle would

be with us a little longer, and Pansy as well. Life seemed difficult, I thought.

“Now, Edward, what about Angus? He and you together could manage to get him up, I think? Get him in bed, but leave his boots on.”

“Oh, don’t trouble Angus,” said Percy very quickly. He had turned very pale, and I realised that he was certainly suffering. His eyes were strained and anxious.

But Angus, sent for by Dorothea, was already in the hall. “I’ll carry him up myself,” he said, “no need for you to trouble, sir.”

“I do not believe in overloading the willing beast,” said Sophonisba’s uncle firmly, “I am too heavy for one. Take my head, Edward; it’s the lightest part of me!” He attempted a laugh.

Pansy came up behind us, very important.

I think Angus had not realised how heavy Sophonisba’s uncle really was, for at the top he stumbled, and if it had not happened that Percy had his arm tightly through mine, he might have fallen to the bottom of the stairs and have broken more than an ankle.

“Well I’ve got here alive, and that’s always something,” said Percy thankfully when he found himself alone with Pansy and me.

“Tut, tut, you are not as bad as all that,” she cried gaily, “we’ll soon put you to rights. Now I’m not going to hurt you, but we’ve got to get that boot off!” She looked at it thoughtfully, her brows wrinkled. Obviously her lessons had not included taking off boots, or if they had, she had forgotten for the moment.

I timidly suggested cutting the boot-laces.

Sophonisba’s uncle looked up at Pansy in rather a touching way, “I’m in safe hands, I know that,” he observed thankfully, “oh woman in our hours of ease, but when pain or sickness wrings the brow—then—

the—er—what-d'yer-call-it, is there all right, comes up to the scratch each time ! ”

“ Shall I send for the doctor ? ” I asked my sister-in-law.

She frowned. “ What for ? ” she asked coldly, “ I have learned all a doctor can teach me. The certificate as good as says so. Ah, it is sprained, not broken.” She sounded disappointed, I thought.

“ That is not such a very long job, is it ? ” I asked.

“ That depends,” she returned.

Percy looked at me reproachfully. “ I am in the hands of an expert, dear boy,” he said. “ We have only to do exactly what she tells us. The queen commands ; we obey.”

Pansy took off his sock. “ There’s a blue mark,” she said.

I thought it looked like dye off the sock which was of a rather vivid blue, but thought it better to say nothing. Pansy always knows best.

“ What a soothing, healing touch ! ” he breathed softly. “ That I might have felt its fingers on my soul before it was for ever too late ! What a nurse was lost to the world when you stooped to be wife and guide to some mere man ! Does he appreciate his blessing, does he realise the sacrifice, the loss to the world ? ”

Pansy did not mention he was her first real case. She was very busy with the bandage, looking a little puzzled, I thought.

“ It’s quite a different colour to the one we had at the classes ! ” she murmured angrily. I imagine the colour put her off, for it took her a long time to bandage and unbandage the sprained ankle. She did two different kind of patterns, and at last decided on a third which stuck better. It was quite a nice-looking pattern, and she contemplated it with some pride.

“Wonderful,” murmured the patient staring at it, “I have never seen anything like it, never !”

“Oh it’s nothing,” said Pansy modestly, “I do them frequently.”

“It’s very pretty,” I said, “I didn’t know you could make patterns with bandages, I thought they were just for tying up.”

“The sort of thing you would think, Edward.”

“It’s handsome is, and handsome does,” whispered the sufferer to me, but Pansy overheard, and blushed, not ill-pleased, I think. She could hardly take her eyes away from the leg of Sophonisba’s uncle.

I got up to go. I had been feeling *de trop* for some time, but Pansy commanded me with her eyes to stay. She seemed shocked at the idea of being left alone with Percy now he was in bed. For Angus and I had put him to bed.

The patient pressed her hand, thanking her faintly. “There are people who reconcile one to a bed of sickness,” he said.

“You must stay there till I give you permission to get up,” she returned.

“Dear lady, what can I ask better, save for the radiance of my nurse’s presence now and then.”

“That’s very satisfactory,” observed Pansy as we went downstairs in search of Sophonisba who had been out when the thing happened, and knew nothing of the calamity under her roof. “I should get my uniform by the next train. I wish the doctor could see me now I have been put to the test. I suppose Sophonisba will lend me a nightgown and a hairbrush, and I can buy a toothbrush in the village ? Really, it was positively Providential that I came down just then.”

I think what she really meant was that it was Providential that Sophonisba’s uncle had come down. As

usual I made no reply. All thought of his going, and of what she had really come to do, had passed from her mind.

"It's a sprained ankle," she went on, using a lot of medical terms, "but we must hope for the best. I trust to bring him round with care. We must see what science and skill can do."

Then Sophonisba, who had just come in and apparently seen Dorothea, followed us into the morning-room. "How do you do, Pansy," she said briskly "Have you got him to go?"

"Haven't you heard? Such a frightful accident! Such a mercy I was just in time," gasped Pansy. "I put him to bed, and——"

"Oh," said Sophonisba taking up her work, "is that one of the things you practise at the classes—puttin' men to bed."

Pansy went scarlet, and glared at my wife. "Certainly not, I am surprised at you! As if dear James would let me go to such things! I meant of course, directed Edward and Angus to put him to bed, and came in afterwards."

"Uncle would be disappointed," returned Sophonisba going on with her darning. "I heard he had bumped down the last few stairs, but it didn't sound much of a howler. Are you sure he's sprained anywhere?"

"Really Sophonisba, this to me! I might be a mere country practitioner! Haven't you heard about my certificate, and what the doctor said?"

"Several times. Have we got to hear again? Uncle's leg——"

"Foot," corrected Pansy firmly, going red. I said nothing.

"Was it black and blue, was——"

“Both,” said Pansy, “at least already turning blue.”

“Like his socks? Horrible staring things, an’ cheap dye that runs in the wash——”

“What have his socks to do with it? It was enormously swollen.”

“More swollen than the other leg? Did you look?”

Pansy went red again, “Sophonisba! As if I would ask a bachelor to put both legs out of bed! Besides James would not like it!”

I stared out of the window.

“I made Edward stay all the time,” went on Pansy virtuously. “I shall not do any bandaging without him.”

“Edward doesn’t care for chaperonin’,” returned Sophonisba very busy with her sock (one of mine), “besides I happen to have a little use for him myself, and after all he is my husband.”

I fidgetted uneasily. It seemed to me that Pansy would have to see that Sophonisba was rather annoyed with her than otherwise for coming to stay and help with Percy Kearness.

“Need he be tied to your apron strings all the time, my dear? I was only suggesting he should be present when I do the bandaging.”

“If nurses have to be chaperoned all the time, where does the use of nursin’ come in—or the fun either when the patient is gettin’ well?” asked Sophonisba, “How is it nurses so often marry their poor patients?”

“I cannot answer for the whole profession,” said Pansy grandly. “It is enough to answer for myself and dear James. Your uncle——”

“Is an adventurer at the best,” returned Sophonisba calmly.

“If there had been an Influence——”

"He might have broken his neck instead of his ankle," answered Sophonisba.

"So he might, such a heavy man, but fortunately it was only the last few stairs——"

"It would not be enough to hurt, I never feared that. He must stay upstairs and have light diet, just slops an' things, and no wine or spirit." She contemplated the darned sock with satisfaction. Sophonisba does most lovely darns.

Pansy looked annoyed, "My patient——" she began.

"Is in my house," concluded Sophonisba. "I will speak to Dorothea about his food." She went from the room.

So did I. I left Pansy biting her lips. When she had gone to bed after freshly bandaging Percy, he sent for me, and I found him scarlet. I concluded his temperature was up or something of that sort, and wondered if he was going to demand Pansy. But instead he requested that I would help him to get off the bandage. He said some nasty things about the bandage which had tied up his toes in a very painful fashion, and asked who had ordered him "that muck" for dinner.

I explained that as an invalid he would have to live on it till he was down again.

He came down the following day, declaring his ankle cured thanks to Pansy's miraculous healing touch. She was very pleased, and parted from him regretfully, saying what a patient in a thousand he was, and what a mercy she had just been in time. She left in nurse's uniform, and wired James to meet her at the station in an open taxi.

"So here we are all happy together again," said Sophonisba's uncle cheerfully.

“Don’ go,” said Edward the Second, “there would be n-n-nothin’ to laugh at if you w-w-went.”

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,” said Sophonisba’s uncle moved, and gave the delighted boys his sacred promise to stay and amuse them.

CHAPTER XI

MISHAPS TO AN UNCLE

IT was shortly after this that a series of most extraordinary mishaps befel uncle. It was incredible to think that so much could happen to one man, and in such a short space of time. Of course he had been accustomed to carrying his life in his hands—he often said so—for some thirty years, and undoubtedly habit becomes second-nature in time. Still I wish he had not found it necessary to drag other people into it. After all, civilisation and its calmer joys were good enough for me, and I had never pretended otherwise. Three times he narrowly escaped death, once my dear Sophonisba and the boys were endangered, and once the consequences to me personally were both painful and lasting. I could not but feel that he might have been more careful.

“Three times have we nearly—but not quite—lost Mr. Kearness, Angus,” I said. “It is very odd, look at it how you will.”

“Ay, its misfortunate, sir,” said Angus.

“That such outside forces should be arrayed against him,” I went on musingly, “it’s almost pointed, Angus.”

He agreed that it was. “Personally I puts it down to Fate,” he observed, and I daresay Angus, who is a very knowledgeable and far-seeing person, was right.

I only wished Fate had not seen fit to involve me so unpleasantly in this special affair.

The first time I had no cause of complaint. None of us were anywhere about when the coping stone fell off the front of the house, and almost on the top of uncle. He had a most merciful and narrow escape. Angus could not understand it. He had gone up to look at the stone which had got loose, and thinks it must have got looser just as Percy stepped right under it. It only just missed him by the fraction of an inch, still it did just miss him, and Angus could not understand that either. He said that look at it how you would, it was "mighty odd." He said how sorry he was. Sophonisba's uncle however, only smiled and replied that owing to carrying his life in his hands for years, the thing was too trifling to be mentioned, and he must ask Angus to drop the subject and not refer to it again in *any* way, and went up to his room and lay down.

The second catastrophe, was, as far as I was concerned, very much more alarming. I shudder even now to think of what might have happened.

We were in the morning-room without uncle, a happy enough party, everything quiet and peaceful, almost as peaceful as if we had no visitor, when strange muffled cries were borne in at the window upon us.

Sophonisba looked up from her accounts for a moment, "that sounds like uncle," she said, "perhaps it hasn't just missed him this time—if one gets three pounds of marmalade for elevenpence halfpenny, how much is seventeen and a half fourpence-halfpennies. Will you try and do it, dear?"

I started to try and do it on a piece of paper, and might have succeeded for all I know, but the door burst open and uncle rushed in creating a diversion. There

was a brown woolly rug-thing hanging to his face. He looked very odd.

“Goodness! The bees have swarmed on uncle,” exclaimed Sophonisba. “How tiresome! Now we shall lose the honey!”

The boys burst into tears. They have a passion for honey.

Sophonisba kept her head as usual. “Please keep still, uncle,” she implored. “They only want to be allowed to stay there. If they get angry they might sting somethin’,—perhaps me an’ the boys.”

The boys did not wait to be stung.

I would gladly have followed them, but Sophonisba would not leave her accounts, and I of course would not leave Sophonisba. Then Angus rushed in, and I was certainly not going to show the white feather before one of the bravest men I know.

“Oh, I was just looking for something to take them in,” I said carelessly, “but I see you have the hive, Angus. You may as well do it as you are here.”

Sophonisba went on with her accounts, trying to make out how much marmalade we ate in a year. She did not seem to mind about the danger. So of course I did not mind either.

Angus however seemed very put-out at finding us with the bees or the bees with us, and glared at uncle for putting us to such annoyance.

As for uncle himself, as soon as he saw Angus he began making a more terrified sound than ever, and to try and rush away from him. He had entirely lost his head in the emergency. I will say however, that he had the sense not to open his lips. The sounds he made were through his closed teeth. It made me think of cats beneath one’s window, and rather got on my nerves.

Angus just said "Whoa! Steady now!" as if Uncle was a horse, grabbed him and held him tight. Then he just took the furry thing off him and dropped it into the hive we had got ready for the new swarm. But for a small portion that detached itself, and fell into a chair, the swarm he took away was fairly complete. He vanished with it.

"Oh uncle, you nearly spoiled the swarm!" said Sophonisba reproachfully, "and we're always so short of honey!"

Uncle choked. He seemed to have difficulty in finding words.

"How did you come to do it?" I asked.

Then he found words—not very nice ones. It was just as well the boys had gone. We gathered he had been dozing under a tree while Angus was taking a swarm in the distance. He said he had found the drowsy humming very soothing and went off to sleep. When he woke up he found the swarm on his face and no sign of Angus. He said he had never known anything so damn-careless in his life, and that it was a miracle he had not been stung.

"Not stung at all?" I asked with some astonishment.

"Not at all," he returned with triumph, "they say bees know their true friend at once. Still it was very unpleasant. I might have lost my life in a dreadful fashion."

"T'anyrate you needn't have come here," said Sophonisba rather sharply, looking up from the marmalade. "You should have thought of our feelin's for once."

Later she said to me: "It wouldn't have been nice to have seen him stung to death, and had to give evidence an' answer silly rude questions, an' be called

careless or liars, or somethin'. But that was uncle all over. He never thinks of anythin' or anybody but his own pleasure."

"I knew Angus would see you were in no danger," said Uncle grimly, and sank down in a chair looking white and sick. Unfortunately it was the chair already occupied by the portion of the swarm which had missed the hive, and they seemed to resent the dual tenancy. At anyrate Uncle bounded up with a piercing scream—almost hitting the ceiling—and rushed upstairs still shrieking.

"Pity Pansy isn't here," said Sophonisba with a sniff. Then she came and looked at the crushed bees. "How cruel!" she exclaimed, and added furiously, "Now there will be less honey than ever!"

"It might have been worse," was all I found to say, "None of us were stung. The bees realised we were their owners and meant to be kind to them, and that uncle was only a visitor."

"A visitor for life I am beginning to think!" she replied exasperated. "How can you take it so philosophically?"

I had not known I was, but I said nothing. I could see that for once in a way Sophonisba was thoroughly put out, and I am sure I did not wonder. I was rather put out myself.

If he had survived, by some extraordinary fatality, his two first disasters, one would have said that he could not possibly have survived the third, and that, if he had survived it, it must have at least ensured his going. It merely ensured his staying, and put me into one of the most frightful predicaments of my life.

No modest man would have remained in the neighbourhood where the accident had happened, but then he proved himself devoid of modesty, left me to do

the blushing and to bear the consequences. A thing which began as a tragedy—or almost a tragedy—ended as a rank indecency. Owing to it I can hardly look Mrs. Kearness or Pansy in the face, and our kitchenmaid has had hysterics constantly, and always, on these trying occasions, asks for me and the brandy. But I suppose, that, painful as it is for me to have to talk about the matter at all, I had better explain how it happened, and begin at the beginning rather than at the end, for not being able to look Mrs. Kearness or Pansy in the face without wilting and turning scarlet is the end,—not the tragedy but its consequences. They are both unusually modest and fastidious women, and I do wish it had not happened to them; their husbands are also unusually particular about the things that happen to their wives and of course held me responsible.

But to come to the episode itself.

You must know that we are the proud possessors of what envious people call a duck-pond, and what we ourselves prefer to look upon as an ornamental piece of water, or lake. It looks innocent and shallow, and is neither.

When Edward the Second was two days old, and it was time to think of such things, I had a huge unclimbable fence put round it, with a tall high door to which I had one key, and Angus the other. My key was kept locked up in my writing-case. Angus always had his in his pocket. I had no intention that Edward the Second should crawl into the pond as soon as he reached crawling age, or climb over the fence when he became of the years that climb. No one could ever hope to climb that fence, I had seen to that, and no one ever unlocked the door save Angus or I. So my small family was not likely to become smaller through

any carelessness of my own. One end was shallow, and the boys and I bathed there on fine days and could all swim a little—a very little.

It was absurd to allude to a place where one bathed as a duck-pond, to say nothing of the fact that it possessed no ducks. There was a boat, a boat-house, a tiny landing-stage, and a vast boat-hook. Some of the happiest hours of my life had been spent rowing Sophonisba and the boys upon that lake, pretending we were pirates and so on, to please the boys who are of the heroic mould. It had a fresh spring, was full of trout I had placed there myself, but hadn't the heart to catch, and was at least nine feet deep in the middle and one end. I think any unprejudiced person will agree that it has no resemblance whatsoever to a duck-pond. To make the resemblance even less, we are growing water-lilies.

Sophonisba's uncle has a great weakness for trout, and was always asking for them. I said I could not catch them, they were far too wily.

He said I need not trouble, he would do that part, and took my fishing-rod and tried. To my secret delight,—and outward commiseration,—the fish refused to be caught. Perhaps the flies I had lent him were not special favourites of theirs, and anyway they were so well fed that temptation was lacking. He fished and fished and swore, but he got no trout.

"Fact is," he said, "there's rain wanted to get some water into that duck-pond of yours and tickle 'em up—the beggars."

I explained that our lake never relied on such external influences having its own private spring. I warned him against the deep end, where the fish congregated.

"Oh, trust me to look after myself," he said, "I

don't want to stick in the mud, or have to wade through the pool."

"It's ten feet deep in the middle and at the end," I warned him.

He laughed, and said it didn't look it, "or ten inches either." He was altogether most offensive about our lake, and I have always felt that what happened served him right, if only I had not been implicated too.

"You can't go by appearances," I said coldly, "I only hope the day won't come when you find yourself in ten feet of water."

He said he hoped not too, little knowing—but I must not get to the end again. He also stated his intention to catch a trout or die in the effort. He did not catch a trout, but he very nearly died, and it would have been better for the modest if he had quite.

But to get back to the beginning.

He said he had been thinking it all out, and had come to the conclusion that if he went in the boat and rowed himself to the deep end where it was too slippery to stand on the bank, he could see the trout lying low beneath him and pick his own. Therefore, would I give him the key? I gave it him on condition he locked the gate carefully after him. He departed confident that that night at dinner would see a great fat trout upon the table.

When the luncheon bell rang, I went into the dining-room with no thought of Percy. When I found that he was not there waiting for us, I was startled and astonished. A presentiment that something must have happened, seized me.

I made to rush away. "He must have fallen into the lake," I said.

"Just like him! He'll splash all the water out of

it!" exclaimed Sophonisba, grabbing me by the arm. "Well let him—that's all!"

The boys looked up thrilled, their eyes very wide. They said they had never seen anybody drowned, but had often wondered what it looked like, and so they were coming too. They slipped off their chairs, though Sophonisba had already helped them to their favourite dish.

"Oh, Edward, why fuss? What's the hurry?" she said to me. "Besides omelettes aren't things that can be left."

Neither were drowning uncles it seemed to me. I said something of the sort.

"Oh Edward why be so morbid? What on earth should he drown for? He couldn't if he tried. Bosh! You know what fishermen are, lost to the world an' all that——"

"Uncle might be lost to the world," I said gravely, "but he would never be lost to his food, dear. He may have got in the deep end."

"Then let him walk out," she retorted.

"You know he couldn't," I said—a trifle sharply, I fear, "you forget how dangerously deep our lake is, just because it looks innocent and shallow. Something must have happened—perhaps something dreadful."

"Then let it happen! It may have been fore-ordained for all we know."

"But——"

"Edward, surely as a clergyman's son-in-law you ought to know that Providence knows best what's good for us."

I was puzzled and confused. I saw Sophonisba did not believe anything had happened to uncle that mattered in any way.

"It might be Fate rather than Providence, Sophonisba," I said.

"Then dear, leave Fate alone for goodness sake! If there's one thing that puts it's back up, it's bein' prevented doin' any thing it's set upon doin'—an' preventin' won't prevent it doin' it in the end. It never does."

But as a humane man I felt it my duty to go and see what had happened, and I went. The boys followed. Sophonisba however said she preferred to stick to the post of duty—and the omelette. She wasn't going to annoy Dorothea by neglecting a regular work of art. "I suppose if you aren't back at once I can have your share too?" she called after me, "Dorothea would so hate to see it wasted."

I told her she could have my share, and she had it there and then.

When we got to the lake and looked through the fence, we found no sign of the boat, and uncle floating buoyantly upon the water. I looked round for Angus, but there was no sign of him. It was very awkward. The drowning man had my key, and Angus had the other. Only Angus himself knew where Angus was! I must say I got into a bit of a fuss. Pansy is always saying how you must act at once in an emergency, or else it will be for ever too late, but what if you can't? When I asked her that she said, "*All* people worth anything act at once. I should."

I wondered what she would have done with a locked door between her and the victim to be saved.

Then Percy saw me and called wildly for help, and I begged him to keep cool and calm.

"He isn't drowned," drawled Billium, his face falling.

"P-p-perhaps he soon will be," returned Edward

the Second who is an incurable optimist, "Doesn't he look f-f-fat an' f-f-funny?"

"Why does he come so far out of the water when he floats?" asked Billium, "Why doesn't he get wet, father?"

"Cos he's so fat," answered Edward the Second, proud to air his knowledge, "most too f-f-fat to d-d-drown, isn't he father?"

I agreed that he was most unfortunately fat. Still, he could not keep on floating for ever. He would become exhausted, and then . . .

I shuddered to think of the tragedy within the gate, and of my own powerlessness.

Then Satan tore up to us, squeezed through the fence, and eyed the sight in front of him with wildest excitement. He seemed to think it was a new game invented specially for his amusement. He tore wildly round and round the lake, barking hilariously, his tail wagging his body so hard that twice it over-balanced it and he fell into the lake. He came out again wagging more than ever.

A brilliant idea struck me. We had taught Satan to retrieve sticks, why not teach him to retrieve the drowning, and practise on Uncle? I shouted to the poor man to keep his courage up, and that Satan should come and tow him to land, but he cried a violent protest. He seemed to have no faith in Satan.

I had, reluctantly, to relinquish the idea.

Angus and the other key must be found at once—that was certain. I told the boys they must search till they ran him to earth. They knew all his haunts. He had been in the habit of playing hide and seek with them for years, and was acknowledged by both as the most skilful of hidiers. I could only hope they would find him before it was too late.

It seemed to me a lifetime before they returned, Angus, looking sullen, in tow. I remembered it was his dinner-hour, and feared lest he resented being made to work in his own sacred time, but for once it couldn't be helped. He had not come any too soon. There was no doubt that Sophonisba's uncle scarcely floated so buoyantly. Some parts of him were actually in the water. It was very terrible.

"I thought you were never coming!" I cried.

Edward the Second breathlessly explained that they had at last found Angus in the old pig-stye, the last place even they had thought of looking for him. It is never used in their games of hide-and-seek for Angus knows that it is sacred to me and Sophonisba, and gives it a wide berth. That he should have gone there to-day of all days, and in his dinner-hour, and while Percy was drowning by inches, was as much a puzzle as an annoyance.

"Good God man!" I burst out exasperated, "What were you doing in the old pig-stye, and at such a time!"

Angus spat at a dandelion, "I was thinking about . . . the young turnips," he said at length, and very sulkily. He never looked at the lake or its contents.

"Turnips!" I began.

"Ay sir, they take a deal o' thinking over, do the young turnips, and I dunno as I've done my duty by them yet."

"And in the meanwhile that's what's happening here!" I said, and pointed dramatically to Percy who at the first sound of Angus' voice had tried, panic stricken, to throw himself under the water.

Angus' eyes seemed unable to focus the scene of the tragedy, "ay them water-rats is a fair pest," he agreed "I'd like to drown 'em proper, that I would!"

"It isn't a water-rat," I shouted, "Where are your eyes, man? Can't you see it's Mr. Kearness, and he's drowning? The boat has sunk. Give me your key at once!"

"Well I never——!" returned Angus staring at the spectacle he could no longer affect not to see, "Whatever is he bathing at this time o' the day for? He'll be catching his death, if he don't look out."

He made to move away.

"He isn't bathing, he's drowning," I returned sharply, "We must save him before it is too late. Give me your key at once. There's no time to be lost! Can't you see he's sinking!"

"There's some as millstones round their neckses wouldn't sink, sir—bad luck to 'em, the aggravating devils——"

"Give me the key!" I shrieked.

Angus scratched his head, "What key, sir?" he asked slowly.

"Your key—the key of the door. Be quick Angus, there's no time to be lost!"

I had never known him so deliberate in my life.

Again he scratched his head, "Dang me if I haven't forgotten which pocket I put 'un in!" he remarked, making no effort to search.

"Look for it at once! Give it me Angus!" I shouted.

He searched pocket after pocket in his slow deliberate way. "Dang me if I ain't gone an' lorst that there key!" he observed at length.

"You can't have lost the key—and at such a time!" I gasped, "Impossible, Angus!"

"I've heard tell as there ain't no such word in the dictionary, sir," replied Angus, "and that you never

knows till you tries, sir. Seemingly it ain't impossible : seemingly the key be gone."

Again he made to depart.

I grabbed him by the arm, " A key I must have ! " I cried.

" Where's yours, sir. ? "

I pointed with a shudder to the drowning victim.

" That's awkward—leastways for that there uncle, sir," he remarked thoughtfully, " but I suppose as what can't be cured mun be endured as my old mother used to say when she fetched us a crack on the jaw." He turned to go.

" Find the key at once," I commanded.

" Won't your omelette be getting cold, sir ? Dorothea she fair put her heart into that there omelette, it'll go again her sore to have it wasted."

" It won't be wasted," I said shortly, knowing Sophonisba would see to that, " Angus, would you have murder on your soul ? "

" Accidents ain't murder," returned Angus laconically, " 'Sides which sir, I've been a free-thinker these four or five days past. Consequently I ain't got no soul, sir."

I detained him again, " Damn you, give me that key ! " I commanded. ■

He gave it me, " the consequences be on your own yead, sir."

I held him by the arm, " Where are you going, man ! You are to stay, do you hear——"

" It's my dinner-hour, sir. Dorothea don't allow me to miss it, sir."

" I shall want your help to get him out."

" I can't swim," he returned decidedly, " and a man of my age don't take kindly to a learning of fancy tricks in the water. 'Sides it wouldn't be right, sir,

me being a married man. Dorothea she wouldn't allow it, sir, she knows—does Dorothea—that husbands aren't all that easy come by. And I can't work on an empty——”

I checked the crude word with a stern glance. Sometimes he forgets that the boys—so fatally imitative—are present. Then they use it to Mrs. Kearness, and I get blamed. It is not as easy as one would suppose to be a successful father.

“Nobody is going to swim,” I said quietly, “We can pull him out with the boat-hook, Angus. It's quite Providential that he floats so well.”

“There's words and words,” said Angus dourly, “and I dunno as Providential be one of mine. Maybe that there uncle was born with a caul seeming as there's no adrowning of him, the Old 'Un looking after his own, both in this world and in the world-to-come—Amen.”

He took off his cap absently, gazing prayerfully into the rather torn and dirty lining. I could see he was far away in spirit, forgetful of our presence or of the victim. It was as if he stood on higher, holier ground, and I imagined him in the wind-swept kirk of his boyhood taking in the precepts of his minister, a true son of Caledonia stern and wild.

I felt I had to rouse him all the same. I touched him lightly with the boat-hook. “Come, Angus!” I said sharply.

He came slowly—very slowly—back to realities.

He rolled up his sleeves and took the boat-hook from me, handling it as some great warrior his sword, “Leave it to me, sir,” he said, “there's many a fish I've gaffed up North. If I don't gaff that there uncle you can call me a liar, sir!”

“You'll be careful?” I implored, for it looked a formidable weapon.

“Ay, I’ll land him, sir. There won’t be no use fighting again. I’ll gaff him, sure as fate, sir.”

When he advanced with the outstretched boat-hook, Percy behaved in a very foolish fashion, as drowning men so often do, trying to hinder, not to help, their brave rescuers. He tried to get right under the water.

“That’s what I call gratitood, sir,” remarked Angus turning to me, “Not that it’s going to serve him any, sir. I know a trick worth two o’ that.”

He leaned well over the lake, and very skilfully, I thought, inserted the hook well into Percy’s clothes,—or more correctly speaking, my clothes. There was a sharp tearing sound.

It was the clothes he landed, not Percy.

I gasped, thoroughly disconcerted, but Angus took it all as a matter of course.

“Won’t come, won’t he?” he remarked, rather a dangerous gleam in his eyes, as once more the boat-hook went in search of Percy.

“But Angus,” I cried, getting into a fuss, “there’s nothing to insert the boat-hook into now!”

“You leave that to me, sir,” said Angus, and the boat-hook went straight for Percy like a bayonet for it’s victim.

Percy, instead of waiting to be saved, very foolishly screamed and once more sought to hide under water, but he might as well have tried to fly. Whatever he did, the unfortunate man was compelled to ride buoyantly on the top of the water. It was obvious he had been born with a caul, and could not be drowned.

His disappearance was of the briefest, then he reappeared again, looking like a white porpoise, shreds of his garments—or rather mine—clinging here and there making him somehow the more shocking.

The entirely nude are not shocking, but the partly

nude always are. I cannot explain why this should be, and yet few, I think, will dispute it. One is the work of God, primitive man in primitive state, no more, no less ; but the other is merely an inadequate attempt to cover nakedness. Percy's attempt was wholly inadequate, still unfortunately the attempt was there, and very shocking we found it.

"Well, he's landed," said Angus, as Percy lay writhing and shrieking on the grass before us, quite silly with fear and panic. In an absentminded way Angus made to treat him as one treats the lashing salmon. Fortunately I was in time to prevent his absent-minded conduct.

Percy screamed "Help!" and "Murder!" It never seemed to occur to him to thank any of us for saving his life. I hope I am not too expecting, but even I was struck by his ingratitude.

"Did you fall out of the boat or sink it?" I asked, for the collapse of the boat puzzled me. It had been guaranteed unsinkable to all intents and purposes. Percy was enormously fat, still our usual boat-load must have weighed as much. The boys are sturdy little chaps, I am not slim, and Sophonisba—I am thankful to say—is very far from being one of those scraggy women fashion so outrageously has decreed to be the correct thing.

I thought I saw a sign of the boat, and taking the boat-hook—with some difficulty—from Angus, got hold of it, and dragged it to the tiny landing-stage. I commanded Angus to pull it in.

"There's no cork in the bottom," I exclaimed in amazement when I had examined it. "How on earth did that come out?"

"Angus launched it," said Percy sitting up.

Angus scratched his head, put his finger through the

hole, and looked altogether puzzled. "Most 'strordinary," he observed, and added in a low voice, "That there uncle must have took it for a trout, sir, and landed it. He don't seem to have landed anything else, sir."

It did not seem to me very likely, but I made no comment. It is always useless to argue with Angus.

"Angus had no sooner helped me in that it filled up and sank," said Percy in an injured voice, just as if it was poor Angus' fault that the cork had come out. He was too frightened to be grateful or logical.

Angus shrugged his shoulders in a pitying sort of way, but made no comment. Doubtless he had his own theory on the matter, and could have spoken as to cause and effect, but he was not going to trouble before a man in the condition of Percy.

He just took up the boat-hook.

I took up the remnant of clothes and offered them to Percy, but he had jumped up and was already—I was horrified to observe—running towards the house.

I ran after him, and Satan ran after me.

"Come back," I shouted, "You might meet someone! Ladies calling, or some of the servants!"

"That's *their* look-out!" he returned shamelessly, and ran on even faster.

Behind him tore Satan, wagging himself, and barking hilariously. Every now and then the little fellow made a playful dart at his very tempting calves. He was enjoying it all extremely—Satan, I mean.

CHAPTER XII

I AM HELD RESPONSIBLE

ANGUS and I looked at each other, and then away again. I felt myself become hot, and Angus reddened too. Even the boys—though they are so young—blushed; they already possess Sophonisba's beautiful innate modesty and refinement.

"A decent man would have been drowned sooner," said Angus voicing my thoughts, "I would have myself—if it wasn't for Dorothea, she being rare set again anything happening to me, owing to the work she had to get me, sir."

Where women are concerned, Angus, I regret to say, takes a very ungallant point of view, but I am sure he does not really mean it.

"If Dorothea meets him, he'll have to answer to me," he added, and departed in some haste.

As I was shortly to learn from my poor horrified Sophonisba herself, Dorothea was only one among the people who encountered Percy.

First of all he came across Mrs. Kearness who fell down on her face, put her fingers in her ears, and screamed, "Help! Fire! Murder! Thieves!"

That was bad, but meeting Pansy proved almost worse. She had come by the afternoon train to give us a pleasant surprise only to receive the same sort of a surprise herself. Though she never loses her head,

or fails to act in an emergency, something went wrong on this occasion, for she did both. She made the emergency much more emergent,—at least so Sophonisba said.

Uncle had run literally into her in his haste to get away from Mrs. Kearness,—for I must do him the justice to admit he did make haste to get away from her. Pansy, panic-stricken, caught hold of him, gripped him ever tighter, and said :

“ Oh my goodness what will James say ! ”

Percy said to be damned to what James would say and for God’s sake to let him go. There were more coming.

Pansy retaliated by shutting her eyes, screaming for help, and holding him like a vice. Sophonisba said she would have been holding him yet, to the further scandal of the neighbourhood—for of course the admiral happened to be looking through his telescope—if she hadn’t heard the awful row and run out to see what was wrong, followed by the whole staff of servants even to the kitchen-maid.

“ My darling how awful for you ! ” I gasped, “ Whatever did you do ? ”

“ I laughed till I cried ; then I cried till I laughed ; and then I laughed till I cried again,” she answered.

“ No wonder you were upset,” I said soothingly, for she was beginning to illustrate what she had done.

“ Oh Edward, fancy ! everybody was so embarrassed—except uncle, of course ! ”

“ It simply doesn’t bear thinking about,” I shuddered.

She put her handkerchief to her face, leaning helplessly against me, gasping most painfully. There was no doubt my poor girl had suffered one of the worst shocks of her life ; she was positively hysterical, and

it takes a great deal to upset Sophonisba's calm. She tried to go on telling me what had happened.

She said she had had to part Percy from Pansy's hold by sheer physical force, and that the kitchen-maid kept saying "Oh My! Don't these ladies go it!" and seemed to think her fascinated eyes were at last catching sight of the "Smart Set" being especially "Smart." Sophonisba went on to add that she feared the kitchen-maid was mentally demoralised for life, and that that sort of thing isn't covered by the Insurance Act; that nothing was that really happened.

"Of course I had to say somethin' to the servants," she went on, sobbing and catching her breath, "if it wasn't for servants I don't suppose one would bother to keep up appearances, but one feels that their morals are a sacred trust an' that sort of thing. So I said he'd been bathin', an' a tramp had come an' walked off with his clothes, an' my own kitchen-maid as good as called me a liar to my face. Oh Edward!"

I helped her to a chair. Her face was almost more than pink, and dreadfully contorted. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. I was more upset than ever.

"An' then there was Pansy" she went on in her jerky voice, "I tried to think of somethin' for Pansy,—you know what she is! But I could only think he had been set on an' robbed an' left naked by the wayside an' had taken Pansy for the Good Samaritan, an' I knew that wouldn't do. So I said it must be an optical illusion, an' no decent woman would have an illusion like that, let alone hang on to it as she had done. An' she was mad as mad, an' still is, an' wants to see you."

"God forbid!" I ejaculated.

"Yes, dear; but Pansy says you must, an' it's Pansy that counts, she bein' here—in the dinin'-room on the

sofa with all the brandy that's left from the servants an' uncle."

I groaned, I could not help it.

She said "Bring me eau de cologne an' put it on my forehead, an' Edward."

"But——"

"She's got the eau de cologne, but she says you are to go at once."

"Impossible," I said, "I—I have to help Angus this afternoon."

"Yes, darlin', of course. An' poor mother is still lyin' on her face under the pear-tree, where you buried her hat. It won't do to leave her there. You have such a wonderful way with mother, Edward. I'm sure if she will get up for anybody an' go home, she will for you. Suppose you attended to her first and then saw Pansy?" She patted my arm.

The old Adam rose up hot and strong within me. In that awful moment I had the wickedness to wish I had stayed with the omelette and left Fate to deal with matters as it thought best. How could I face these angry outraged women? How could they possibly desire that I should? The subject was not even mentionable before one of the opposite sex. I would not have it mentioned to me.

I turned to flee, "I will not put up with it," I exclaimed fiercely, "They make me responsible for everything."

Sophonisba grabbed me. I quite understood how difficult Percy may have found it to get away. "Darlin' you must!" she said in a firm coaxing way, "They won't calm down till they've let out at somebody, an' they know how sympathetic an' understandin' you always are."

"But I don't feel like that now, Sophonisba," I

pleaded, "I only feel very upset myself, and I haven't had my lunch or anything."

"Yes, it was a pity you left that omelette. If only you hadn't, how different things would have been ; but darlin' you see you've brought it all about by not stayin' an' havin' your lunch as I asked you to, an' somebody has got to take the consequences."

"Yes, but not *all* the consequences surely, Sophonisba ? "

"Oh Edward I never tasted such an omelette an' never will again, it was more like a dream than anythin'."

"And now everything is just like a nightmare," I groaned.

"Poor darlin' yes it is a shame, but somebody's got to, you know If you had stayed an' shared it with me as I wanted you to, even he, aggravatin' as he is, couldn't have gone on floatin' for ever. If the telescopin' admiral happens to light on mother lyin' under the pear-tree kickin' an' squallin' like a—a rabbit, Oh Edward what a frightful scandal he will make of it, an' she a clergyman's wife an' all, an' so awfully respected ! "

"Let him make another scandal ! " I exclaimed through set teeth. He might say what he liked about my mother-in-law, I could not help it.

"You forget the poor pater. He is so sensitive."

"It seems a sensitive world," I returned with some bitterness.

"Yes indeed it is. Fancy Edward, the kitchen-maid is quite prostrate. She seemed quite to mind."

"Does she also demand to see me ? " I asked with some irony.

"Darlin' don't set your mouth like that, it makes you look so funny."

“ Well, I don’t feel in the least funny,” I assured her.

“ Need you take it like this ? ”

I sighed and kissed her, “ Oh Sophonisba if there were only you and I and the boys in the world how happy we should be ! ”

“ It’d be a bit awkward without butchers an’ bakers an’ that. I shouldn’t like to miss my grub even to be quite alone, though that would be lovely. No, Clare doesn’t insist on seein’ you just at present, t’anyrate I told her she couldn’t. Besides, she’s gone to bed with the hot-water bottle so that’s all right. If only they don’t all give notice. Only Dorothea and Jane didn’t succumb. Dorothea said, ‘ Angus is gettin’ very careless—the great Gahoo ! I’ll give him a proper talkin’ to for this, lettin’ him escape—the silly fool ! ’ Jane cast down her eyes and looked simply frightfully modest—so affected !—but then she’s been full of airs and graces lately, an’ said, ‘ Oh the poor dear young gentleman ! He’ll catch his death, pore lamb ! ’ It was she who helped me to get him away from Pansy—an’ it took some doin’ I can tell you ! She lit his fire an’ took him up a brandy bottle. But there isn’t any left. Isn’t it tiresome ? ”

I thought it rather more than tiresome. If ever a man needed a stiff brandy-and-soda to rally his shattered nerves and general awful apprehension, I needed it. It was all part of the cross I had been called upon to bear since the coming of Percy Kearness. No omelette, no luncheon, no brandy, and two outraged hysterical women to be faced and soothed into saying it didn’t matter, and they would forgive and forget, and wouldn’t blame me this once if only I would be more careful in future.

Sophonisba said that for her sake and because I loved her, I must go and pick up her mother first.

So I went and tried to pick up Mrs. Kearness. It wasn't my fault that I didn't succeed, for the more she resisted, the more firmly I got hold of her. I went in silence, and the very moment I touched her, she began shrieking, and trying to burrow into the grave of her best hat. I had purposely refrained from any comment, feeling sure I could leave that part to her, but when she screamed louder, and said, "Unhand me monster! I am a clergyman's wife!" it dawned upon me that perhaps she was under a misapprehension.

"Dear Mrs. Kearness, it's me—Edward," I said miserably, for I very much wished it wasn't.

She sat up with a jerk, and glared at me, "Oh it's you—— I thought it was——" Her face went a deeper scarlet, "Why didn't you say so at once, Edward? Why did you let him escape? My husband warned you, and you took no notice. I trust this will be a lesson to you."

I sighed, and said it would. I never contradict, let alone argue with, Sophonisba's mother. She is not that sort of a woman.

"We shall never be able to hide this scandal—— people of our position——so respected. I daresay the daily papers will come out with a special edition to-morrow and us in it. And my photographs are shocking libels! Oh Edward, just look what your thoughtlessness has brought on us! How I am to tell my poor husband, I can't think!"

"Then why tell him?" I asked nervously. Perhaps Mr. Kearness would insist upon seeing me too. There was no end to the thing, it was like one of those "snowballs" which have been,—mercifully,—declared illegal. "I don't think I would tell him if were you," I said again. It is always the last straw which breaks

the camel's back. There was still Pansy to come without any Mr. Kearness.

My mother-in-law drew herself up, and looked down at me with an expression which I shall not soon forget. She is much taller than I which always puts a man at such a disadvantage in a woman's presence, I think. I never forget the difference in our statures.

"I am shocked and surprised at you, Edward!" she burst out indignantly, "You forget, I think, that I am a clergyman's wife, to whom her husband must be guide, confessor, and minister, as well as husband!"

"How frightful!" I gasped thoughtlessly. I could only wonder how she had endured so long, but the courage of women is well-known. They early learn to suffer and be strong. As a husband Mr. Kearness must have been somewhat of a trial, but considered as guide, confessor, and minister in addition, I simply could not endure to think of it, and wondered how she could.

"Frightful to confess the truth! Then you advocate secrecy between husbands and wives! Is that the line you take with my poor daughter, and the reason why she has seemed so changed and dispirited lately?"

I was too exasperated to answer. I supported her to the little gate, saw her on her way home. Then I returned to Sophonisba—I had not hurried back—and asked if Pansy had caught her train.

She said that Pansy didn't seem to have a train, or that, if she had, she certainly had not caught it, or attempted to. "She's not in a condition to travel at all," she said regretfully, "She's still lyin' on the sofa with the brandy, and askin' for you to come at once. There won't be any peace till you do, an' she won't leave the dinin'-room sofa, an' there's meals to be thought of. Do go dear—just to please me."

So of course I went. After all, what was one trial

more or less. I had become accustomed to trials since the arrival of Sophonisba's uncle. Life seemed one long endless nightmare.

Pansy raised a white exhausted face at sight of me ; my eyes fell guiltily, and my cheeks reddened. I did hope she would forget that she brought me up, and remember to spare my delicacy. I was only too anxious to spare hers in every way in my power.

When I opened my eyes she was lying back and moaning, feeling feebly for the brandy.

"It's all over now Pansy," I said cheerfully.

"All shocks are seriously shocking," she groaned in answer, "Oh Edward, how could you ! And nobody can say I wasn't most careful in your up-bringing. I wouldn't even let you go about in your little shirt as you wanted——"

I shivered with horror and embarrassment, "I'm sure——" I began.

"Edward is my memory failing me, or isn't it ? I say you did try to, and that's enough. We will drop the subject if you please. And this is the consequence ! What next ? "

"It's all over now," I said again.

"Some things are never over, their effects remain." She had never spoken a truer word, as I, to whom the effects were adhering, was soon to find out. "And me a respectable married woman ! "

"Quite so," I said worried, "quite so ! "

"Edward ! Don't use that tone to me ! "

"What tone ? "

"As if you doubted it."

"It's the very last thing I could doubt," I murmured feelingly. I began to wish that the catastrophe had chosen victims less fearfully respectable than Pansy or Mrs. Kearness. There was a Mrs. Gardeiner

in the neighbourhood who would hardly have minded at all to speak of. If only Fate could have seen to it that it had happened to her instead !

It is almost tragic, I often think, how little discrimination Fate shows.

" I am so sensitive, so innately refined, that you, a mere gross coarse man, cannot even imagine what this thing has meant to me."

" Really Pansy I am not coarse or gross," I pleaded.

" You must be ! *All men are.*"

" But——"

" Of course James is an exception," she added quickly.

I gave an impatient shrug. In no sense of the word is James an exception.

" Edward why did you put him up to it ? "

" I put him up to it ! " I gasped, " Good God, Pansy ! "

" Hush ! You ought to be ashamed ! Didn't you fish him out of the duck-pond in that—that disgraceful condition ? Then who is to blame, if you aren't ? "

" He was in the lake. Could I see him drown before my eyes ? "

" Nobody asked you to see him drown if you're so squeamish, you could have shut them. You were keeping Sophonisba waiting for lunch, no decent husband treats his wife like that. The meal was spoiled. You will only have yourself to blame if the cook gives notice. I consider your conduct most reprehensible in every way ! "

I shrugged my shoulders.

" Even dark porpoises in the water revolt my delicacy," she went on angrily, " but white ones out ! Oh Edward ! The wonder to me is that I'm still alive."

" Everything is most unfortunate," I owned.

"If that had been all! Edward, that libertine grabbed hold of me, and wouldn't let go! Soapy and the servants had to save me by force. What do you think of that?"

I didn't know what to think, and said so.

"You might well gasp! The question is what will James think."

"But—" I began quickly.

"As for what he will say or do, I hardly dare think of it. When really roused his temper and violence are quite frightful. He may want to kill him—or you. Can't you see my painful position?"

"The position is certainly most painful," I owned feelingly.

"It is nothing to what it will be."

"But why tell James?" I asked anxiously, "surely, as a wife, it is your duty and—er—privilege to save his feelings." I would have saved James from the worst. He is some years my senior, a violent powerful man, and might, in a passion, do himself an injury and be sorry afterwards.

Pansy sat up and glared at me.

"You—you, Edward, whom I brought up, are actually counselling me to deceive the man who loves and trusts me!"

"Oh does he?" I asked astonished, and added hurriedly, "Of course he does. Any husband would," but I do not think I should—married to Pansy.

"All wives tell their husbands everything," she stated, still glaring.

"Oh do they!" I said wondering.

"All husbands tell their wives everything," she went on.

"Oh do they!" I said again, and wondered even more.

"James and I always do. We have never kept anything from each other. We simply couldn't. We'd have to tell or die."

"But nothing has happened to James," I said foolishly. I knew for a fact he had a few secrets unshared with Pansy.

"What are you talking about, Edward? Don't be silly."

I said nothing. I often do when conversationally engaged with women. They never seem to miss my part, I find, and I know several, who, very kindly, are ready to enter into conversation with me at any time.

"Has it come to this already! You—you whom I used to bring back to say your prayers night after night—you advocate secrets between husbands and wives!"

"I think it depends upon the husbands and wives," I ventured timidly, "It—it might almost be kinder not to tell some sorts. Why upset a husband—more than you need, I mean? It might bring on one of James's bad attacks of gout, and this time it might fly to his head."

"I will take that risk rather than keep a secret from James," she announced firmly.

It seemed to me that it would be James,—and perhaps myself,—who would be taking the risk, but it was useless to point out this to Pansy. She never bothers about minor details.

"You will of course do as you please," I said unhappily.

"There is no question of doing as I please. I shall do,—as I have always done,—what my conscience and sacred duty dictates."

"And it dictates—— confession?" I asked.

"It does."

I saw there was nothing for it but to leave it at that.

I went up and knocked at the culprit's door.

I thought if I told him about James and the fearful danger in which he stood, he might think it better to take his departure there and then.

A startled panic-stricken cry answered my knock, "Go away at once!" it implored, "I am gone to bed. If you've no consideration for your own reputation, at least think of mine!"

I took no notice of this attempt at facetiousness, it merely irritated me afresh, and tore at the handle. I realised the door was locked.

"I'm saying my prayers," said the voice which sounded as if it came from under the clothes—hardly the place to say one's prayers—"And mustn't be interrupted. It wouldn't be right. Everybody seems to forget," he added with a bellow of indignation, "that I was religiously brought up."

"But look here—" I began.

There was an exclamation, and I heard him bound from the bed and come to the door, whence, with much puffing and blowing, an elaborate barricade was seemingly removed. Last of all he unlocked the door, and bade me come in. Then he locked it after me, and got back into bed.

"Lord, you gave me the turn of my life," he gasped, "I thought it was that woman! Edward, she clung to me like an octopus, man—grabbed me as a drowning man grabs a straw! It really was the last straw." He giggled hysterically.

I was more than sick to death of the varied versions of the affair, "She says you grabbed her," I said wearily, "and is going to tell her husband about it. He's rather a violent man—my brother James. She says he's sure to bring his revolver."

“Can he shoot?” asked Percy, “It isn’t everybody who owns a revolver than can.”

“James can do everything,” I stated positively, “ask Pansy.”

“I think I’d rather not. I have had almost enough of Pansy. The way she grabbed me——”

“She says you——”

“What me! Why everybody knows I never grab anything over thirty. I wouldn’t consider it playing the game!”

“James will naturally believe her story——”

“What a convenient husband——”

“He always does. He may shoot.”

“How unpleasant for you to be connected with such a ridiculous person,” he said with a yawn. It was as if his uncanny intuition told him who would really get all the blame.

“He’d be sure to shoot at you,” I went on.

“He might miss,” suggested Percy in no way interested in the doings of James, “Or I mightn’t happen to be anywhere handy at the time. One never knows one’s luck.”

“But——”

“Besides I should lodge a complaint as to his wife’s conduct. Hang it all Edward, I’m a respectable unmarried man, and nobody seems to think of my outraged modesty! I mightn’t have any!”

I did not think he had.

“But for Jane and Soapy she would have had me still,” he went on, his indignation rising, “I have had two most frightful and narrow escapes. My nerves are quite shattered. I could do with a stiff glass of brandy-and-soda to pull me together, old son, and that’s a fact.”

I could have done with one myself. I knew he had

already had several, and what was left was in the tenacious grasp of Pansy. I, who had had to bear the brunt of everything, had had none, and I said so with some force and bitterness.

Then I went down into my study and brooded darkly, fortunately Sophonisba came and brooded darkly too, so it wasn't as bad as it might have been.

The next day, just as I was recovering a little from the shock, the bell rang, and the Reverend Mr. Kearness and my brother James were ushered in upon me at the same moment. There was no escape. Anything in that direction had already been done by Percy Kearness who was never one to miss his opportunities.

Both wore very unpleasant expressions, and they had no sooner shut themselves in with me, than I found myself in the dock faced with two most inexorable judges.

"At first I could not believe it!" exclaimed my brother, getting started first, though only by a fraction of a second. I think my father-in-law resented being out-paced, and thought James ought to have shown more respect for his cloth.

I wriggled, but said nothing. I felt as wretched as a wretched butterfly on a pin must feel. I wished they would hurry and get it over.

"Do not prevaricate, Edward," went on James in his elder-brother fashion, "Besides, it would be useless. Your guilty face tells me it is all true, and that, for all I know, there may be worse behind it. That my wife should meet with such an outrage at your hands!"

"And mine!" burst out Mr. Kearness, catching up. "I can hardly believe it even yet. In broad daylight! In the open! No clothes—or worse than none!"

"Grabbing! Having to be forcibly extricated!"

Edward, have you taken to drink since your marriage ? ”

“ I don’t know,” I returned feebly.

“ Why since his marriage ? ” demanded my father-in-law turning on James, “ You forget he married my daughter, sir.”

“ It is impossible to forget that your daughter married him,” retorted James, his face purple with wrath, “ And this is the consequence, sir ! ”

I remained silent and tried to get away. It seemed to me that if they were prepared to quarrel with each other my presence was scarcely needed, and I do so hate scenes and disagreeables. James however seized one arm, my father-in-law the other. I could not but feel that I was between the devil and the deep sea, but I did not give expression to this idea. Instead I tried to smile pleasantly.

“ Your brain’s going ! ” exclaimed James staring at me in horror, “ That explains it ! ”

“ If there was insanity in the family I should have been told. It is infamous ! ” exclaimed Mr. Kearness shrilly.

“ There is no insanity in the family,” said James brusquely, “ The whole mischief has started since his marriage. Only a few years ago he was one of the most modest, the most virtuous of men, almost eccentrically so, and now——! You see for yourself what he’s come to ! That marriage, which should have such an ennobling effect, should have demoralised you like this, Edward ! That you should rush about in—in—— and in the middle of the morning, grabbing married women——! ”

I put my hand to my head, and the world whirled madly. I did not know whether I was on my head or my heels, and I didn’t much care. Was it possible

that I, Edward Delland, had done this thing? It almost began to seem so. If everybody said I had it quite looked like it, and what was one opinion against so many? I must be mad. Anyway, whether I had committed the outrage myself or not, the blame was entirely mine—that was only too certain.

“I didn’t want to grab them,” I said piteously, “I swear it was the very last thing I wanted.”

“Then why do it?” demanded my brother unconvinced. “Look here, Edward, there’s something very odd. How can you have changed like this? Have you taken to going out in the sun without your hat? Did you feel funny in your head yesterday?”

“I did not feel in the least funny in my head, James, thank you,” I returned stiffly. I had never felt less funny.

“But my dear chap there must be some theory——”

Just then Pansy rushed in and supplied it.

She had not, of course, seen her husband since the unfortunate event, and her own incoherent explanation of it sent by the night’s post. She at once rushed into his arms and clung to him, and once more I tried to get away. I would gladly have left husband and wife alone in the moments of their reunion; such meetings ought to be sacred, I think. But they would not have it so.

Pansy began to sob, and told James if he would take her back, and forgive and forget, she would be a loving faithful wife ever after, and make him really happy.

“I couldn’t bear to be divorced,” she wept, “It would be so awful to have to call myself Miss Smith again, and at my age!”

Then James shook Pansy, and seemed in an awful way, and told her to tell him all at once, and who the devil was the fellow, and it just showed you,—you

couldn't trust a woman further than you could see her, and it was wiser not to trust her even then. They were all as cunning as you made 'em !

And this time I really thought my brain must be going.

Mr. Kearness opened his mouth very wide, and I sank in a chair, without even the spirit to slip past them all and away. Was it Pansy after all who had rushed about in—in what was, or wasn't, rushed about in ? Was my name Edward ? Had Sophonisba and I an uncle we couldn't get rid of ? Were we married ? And who were the boys who lived with us ? It seemed to me that my brain was not merely going, but had already gone.

Pansy came out with her garbled version of the tragedy, and James looked relieved. He even understood, that while I hadn't done it myself, only put it into another's head, and egged him into continuing in it, yet I had seemed ashamed for a little time. He said he should take his wife away at once, and I said I thought it might be as well, the shock had been very dreadful.

Then James, in spite of Mr. Kearness' cloth and rising exasperation, went on with what he was saying, and added to it. He concluded by remarking that he was thunderstruck to hear that I had actually tried to persuade Pansy to keep my disgrace a secret. He said there should be no secrets between wives and husbands, that if it was wrong for a husband to keep a secret from a wife, and the very last thing that he personally would think of, or was capable of even if he wished——”

“ Didn't I tell you ? ” demanded Pansy triumphantly of me.

I made no reply, and James went on with his homily,

—that if it was wrong for a husband to keep a secret from his wife, it was heinous to a degree for any sort of wife to keep any sort of secret from any sort of husband.

“ Even the church—” he began.

Then Mr. Kearness got going with his bottled-up sermon, and even James could not stop him. He was wound to go on till he ran down. We got all his ideas on these, and other sacred matters, various side-issues, and fifthlies and sixthlies.

I sat there wondering what the first symptom of nervous prostration was like, and if there was any cure.

When Mr. Kearness had got to seventhly, Sophonisba burst in.

That dried Mr. Kearness up, but started James, who began to say,—in a brotherly fashion,—just what he thought of me, and my worse than reprehensible, conduct.

Sophonisba glared at everybody, rushed up to James, boxed his ears, and bundled him out of the house, Pansy after him, “ Comin’ here puttin’ the blame everywhere but where it belongs,” she exclaimed, “ an’ a wife that grabs men with nothin’——”

Mercifully the last was lost in the loud bang of the door.

Then she turned to her father, who had paused in his sermon, with his mouth half-open, at sight of her and the glint in her eye.

“ Now then pater,” she said decidedly, “ you haven’t got a congregation without the nerve to get up an’ go. You leave Edward alone, he’s good enough for me, an’ a jolly sight too good for anybody else, an’ I was very glad an’ lucky to get him as you know quite well, and I won’t have him put on an’ blamed for anythin’ an’ everythin’. It’s sickenin’ ! You keep your own wife in

order an' let my poor darlin' alone, he hasn't the life of a dog what with my relations an' all, an' Satan bein' booted out of your house for simply nothin' but lookin' in the larder—dear little fellow! An' nearly drowned in the lake owin' to Uncle's goin's on, an' t'anyrate wet to the skin an' might have taken his death, an' havin' to be dried on the boys' towel——”

“My dear——” began her father helplessly.

“You just wait,” said Sophonisba gasping, “I haven't got my second wind yet!”

For Mr. Kearness had already made for the door.

“There's no hurry,” said Sophonisba placing herself in front of it, “you didn't let Edward get away. You don't let your poor congregation get away. Don't see why the boot should always be on the same leg, an' t'anyrate it isn't very nice for Edward to have a mother-in-law tryin' to bring public disgrace upon him. Any modest woman would have run from Uncle instead of for him, an' a proper clergyman's wife would have died sooner. I don't see that anyone could possibly blame Edward if he ran away an' deserted me owin' to my relations, an' left all his money to an Inebriate's Home——”

Mr. Kearness, his mouth still open, his sermon to be “continued in our next,” pushed past me and was gone with remarkable agility.

“I shant' go to church for ages,” announced Sophonisba, and put her arms round my neck and made up for everything, my relations as well as her own.

Still it was weeks and months before the effects of this most painful of episodes wore off. Its results were most unfortunate, there was so much scandal, and so many garbled versions. Something went wrong with the telescope at the most critical moment, with the result

that the admiral saw double, two Percys, one of which he made out to be me, and two Pansys, the identity of one of which he could not be sure of, but wouldn't mind betting on Mrs. Gardeiner. His story reads like a Saturnalia, and the neighbourhood knows it by heart, and adds to it a little on its own account,—most effective touches from the point of view of a new listener, if not from mine.

People say, that while they were,—for the most part, and just at first,—astonished at the 'goings on' at Moss End, yet they had always suspected there was something of the sort under the surface, that I had always appeared far 'too good to be true.' They no longer wondered at anything, nothing could surprise them any longer; they were only waiting to see what next.

"It will take some livin' down," sighed Sophonisba.

Another result is Percy's most absurd, and almost morbid fear, of Angus. He might almost regard him as responsible, or as,—in some degree,—the unconscious instrument of Fate.

I explained this attitude to Angus who was very astonished, and said he could not understand it.

"Maybe it's just nerves, sir," he observed.

"I suppose so," I agreed, "I hardly see how else one could explain all these mishaps to Mr. Kearness, these,—regrettably,—narrow escapes from death?"

Angus sighed, "Ay no truer word is ever spoke than 'there's many a slip,' sir."

"You cannot explain it?" I ventured.

Angus scratched his head, "Well, sir, I dunno as I could explain it, exactly sir, but I may have my suspicions-like. Being brought up religious,—though agin

my will and convictions, sir,—I dunno as I wouldn't just call it—” he paused.

“What ? ” I asked, for I really wanted to know.

“The Visitation of God, sir,” he said gravely.

I could but leave it at that.

CHAPTER XIII

ANGUS HAS A BRILLIANT IDEA

EVEN though the painful impression grew gradually less, things did not otherwise improve. The position became almost daily more difficult, the unbidden guest more firmly established. I hinted, and Sophonisba did more than hint, but in the battle of wills and wits it was always we who lost. There seemed little doubt that Percy was genuinely fond of us, and greatly appreciated us and our home. Then he had a trust and admiration for us which was really rather touching. How could we turn him out like a homeless dog to starve? If only he would go of his own accord.

“He’s so pathetic somehow,” I groaned to Sophonisba, “it makes it more impossible.”

“If you ask me I think we are the pathetic ones, Edward,” she retorted, “our home, characters, garden, boys, taken from us! What have we left? We’re barely acquaintances now, you an’ me. If this goes on we shall end by bein’ complete strangers an’ polite to each other.” Her voice shook.

I was horrified at a suggestion that took my breath away, and pointed out how such things could never come to pass.

“Then do somethin’!” she commanded, “Why sit down under it, dear?”

I dashed out into the garden to think, and to find Angus.

Instead however I met my father-in-law coming up the drive, "This is fortunate," he said, in which I did not agree with him, "I have come to see you specially. This matter of Percy must be put a stop to. I never thought you would keep him after conduct to which we will not refer, but he seems positively settled down here. I warned you once and I warn you again, he will stick to you like a limpet, sponge on you, borrow your money, anything, and will bring discredit on you as well. It may need strong measures to eject him, but it's got to be done. As Sophonisba's husband it is your duty to do it."

"And if he fulfils his threat of going to the workhouse under the eyes of the neighbourhood?" I asked.

My father-in-law looked pale and startled, "He would never do that!" he gasped, "That's just an idle threat. It must not come to anything of that sort—or fresh talk. Just see to it he goes willingly, quietly, easily."

"Exactly!"

"The workhouse! Why Percy is the most luxurious of creatures. He would not sit through the first meal, certainly not through the second!"

"But if he went at all it would be enough for some rather odd things to be said. The vicar's brother in the workhouse!"

Mr. Kearness went a dusky red and shuffled with his very large flat feet. I think if he had not been a clergyman he would have found it helpful to say things. As it was the poor man could only look them and think them. "That he should have come down to this!" burst from him at length. "But there's a failure in every family, they say!"

I remembered how Percy himself had once said the same.

“If I could only get to see Sophonisba now and then,” I sighed, “I think I could bear it better.”

Mr. Kearness stared at me with his mouth open, “Oh——Soapy——” he said at length, “just so. Very meritorious indeed, my dear fellow, very meritorious.”

“He is always wandering in and out when one least expects him,” I complained peevishly, “he hates solitude, and we are never free from him. And you know Sophonisba and I have never had a honeymoon.”

I could not help feeling aggrieved. It does not seem to me the thing to have relations dropping in and out upon a honeymoon.

My father-in-law opened his mouth again—Sophonisba once said he reminded her of the whale getting ready to swallow Jonah—and then—rather inconsequently—mentioned the date upon which he had married us, “It was not exactly yesterday,” he added.

“But it feels like it,” I said, “or at least did till Percy came to live with us.”

“Well he mustn’t live with you any longer. Tell him to go in plain English, and if the more graphic kind is required, well, I can’t believe it would be considered a sin. At anyrate I would advise you to risk it. The thing is to get him to go.”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Such a shocking influence for your dear boys, their adoration of him is quite appalling. I want to see at least one of them in my shoes, you know.”

It occurred to me that the whole of Edward the Second, and most of Billium, would go into one of Mr. Kearness’ shoes, but I made no comment.

“It was a great disappointment to me that I had no son to follow in my footsteps,” he went on, and I

remembered Sophonisba once saying in reply to this remark, "Well it might have been a greater disappointment for the son!" but again I listened without comment.

"I followed my father and grandfather," he continued, it was a favourite theme with him, though to me Sophonisba had said often enough that it was far from being the same with her, and that "Family skeletons were better left in their cupboards."

"So you did," I observed feebly.

"But in place of a son I have only grandsons, yet we can still carry on the old tradition, eh?"

"Edward the Second stammers very badly," I said quickly, "and Billium has an awful drawl."

He waved his hand, "That does not matter."

"But people would never get out of church!" I gasped.

Mr. Kearness frowned, and I realised I had said the wrong thing, "Serve them right," he said sharply, "I mean—do them good. These days of rush and hurry and motors have affected congregations in the most shocking fashion. They are always ready to leave before I am. I have known them call it 'nose-bleeding.'"

I looked anywhere but at my father-in-law. Both Sophonisba and the boys have this affliction in church, though I have never known them have it elsewhere. I only had that cowardice which longed for escape, but lacked the courage.

I hurried to change the conversation back to what it started at, "The first thing to do is to get rid of Percy," I observed.

"The sooner the better. Apart from what happened not long ago, and of which outrage my dear wife was a victim, he is a danger to the morals of the com-

munity. Did you ever hear of the—er—the gardener's wife ? ”

“ I may have done,” I answered wearily, for I was more than sick of the gardener's wife.

“ About the money he took ? Church funds ? That he went under a false name for years ? Was actually in prison ? What of these thirty years ? How have they been spent ? Dare one even ask ? And now this last fraud—pretending to come home rich and welcomed, and without a cent to his name ; not even luggage that one could call luggage ! Now Edward put your foot down before it is too late. After all a man is surely master in his own house.”

He seemed very sure on this point, which, knowing Mrs. Kearness as I had the privilege of doing, rather astonished me. I was thankful to remember, that for my own part, I had the reality rather than the illusion to cling to.

“ Of course I am,” I said.

He dug holes in the gravel with his umbrella, “ Of course my dear fellow, of course. Pray don't think I doubt it ! Then get rid of him ! ”

“ Get rid of what or whom, and how and when and where ? ” asked a laughing voice, and Percy sauntered up to us.

My father-in-law scowled at him.

“ Hullo ! That you William ? ” asked Percy in his casual way, “ Sky-piloting as usual, eh ? How's parochial-spinsters to-day ? Slumpish, eh ? What a hot time you parsons have of it ! Naughty ! Naughty ! Such a “ come hither ” in your 'een ! ” He shook a fat finger at his shocked and disgusted brother.

“ You sponger ! ” cried Mr. Kearness, “ Aren't you ashamed ? Have you forgotten all the lessons of your youth ? ”

“ Watch and prey, eh ? So I do, old son, so I do ! ”

“ Why can't you help yourself, wastrel ? ”

“ Exactly what I do,” Percy seemed highly amused, “ Haven't I always helped myself ? Didn't I get quodded for it ? ”

“ You are helping yourself to Edward's hospitality against his will. Husband and wife should be left alone.”

“ Poor devils ! ”

“ When are you going ? They see nothing of each other.”

“ Seeing that they've never been on a honeymoon would it be proper that they should ? Think of me as your daughter's chaperone, old chap, and make your mind easy.”

“ Your example is nothing short of pernicious as far as my grandsons are concerned. How are they likely to grow up with you ever before their eyes ? Liars, libertines——”

“ Such a beautiful faith in human nature,” sighed Percy casting up his eyes, “ No wonder your church is always full ! ”

Mr. Kearness, whose church is, I regret to have to state, extremely empty, went scarlet with anger, and without another word hurried in search of Sophonisba.

“ Poor old William,” lamented Percy, “ well, I suppose it can't be helped now. He wasn't painlessly destroyed young enough, and that's a fact. Five daughters, and only Soapy and Grace married, or likely to be ! Marries the village girls in batches, pretty and plain, young and old, but can't marry his own comely daughters ! What's the use of being a clergyman if you can't do that ? I'm off to the village—got a sovereign on you ? I've left my purse inside.”

I do not know whether Percy possessed a purse or not, but I do know that it was never where he was. I handed him the sovereign, and he departed whistling "My Pretty Jane," a very favourite melody of his, and one rather objected to by Sophonisba because, she said, it put ideas into the girl's head.

Then I succeeded in finding Angus, and after a general discussion, said I had been feeling very depressed lately, and feared that my liver was out of order. "Or it may be nerves," I added, "possibly is, because when people get nerves very badly, the first thing the doctor says is that they mustn't see their relations on any account, and I feel as if I should like a doctor to make up that prescription now."

"It's better to the taste than many of their prescriptions, sir," replied Angus thoughtfully, "and more lasting in it's effects I've often thought. But when one knows the ill and the remedy it do seem a rare pity to go wasting money on doctors."

I sighed rather hopelessly.

"When folk won't go away from you, sir, maybe, it wouldn't be a bad idea to go away from folk. Nature made folk in two's, sir, three being trumpery. Fours is all right, sir, when it's divided into two twos, but five is a crowd. If four was to go away comfortable-like maybe the one left behind would find it lonesome-like and go away too."

"To the same place?" I remarked gloomily.

"If folk don't know the name of the place where folk is staying, folk can't come and pass the time of day with them, sir."

"There's something in that," I said hopefully. But then I sighed again. I could not imagine life without Moss End. All the years of my life have been

spent there—where and how the longer years of mere existence were spent matters little. I never let myself think of them. It seemed hard that a man should have to leave an earthly paradise because his visitor would not leave it either.

“When folk is made too comfortable, sir ; folk stay, specially when the Old Un’ watches over him in the hours of danger. If folk were made real uncomfortable in their eating and drinking and sleeping, there wouldn’t be so much staying. If that there uncle was left to Dorothea and me, I should not be surprised if he was to give notice sudden-like, sir. You see Dorothea do hanker something crool after Spring cleaning, and I hanker after doing my bits with the hoe and all that in the gardin, sir. These last days, sir, I’ve become a Fatalist like them old gents, sir. I feels as things were Meant-like, and bound to happen, and that he’ll go along of them, and never come back no more. The house will be a poor place to bide in, no time for cooking or nothink, and I don’t know as the gardin will be much better. Once out, sir, well folk can be kept out—D.V.—or not ! It’s what them nasty bold foreigners call ‘ Kiss-me,’ sir, and can’t be helped nohow.”

I had never known Angus make such a long speech in his life. I think he was astonished himself.

“Of course,” I said, “If we did happen to get called away on urgent private affairs, Angus, I should leave the garden entirely in your charge, and your mistress would do the same with the house as far as Dorothea was concerned. We both know we can trust you to look after our best interests in every way.”

I shook his hand, pressed a five-pound note into it, hoping that seeing what a special occasion it was, he would, for once, accept it. He will never accept five-

pound notes, save at Christmas, when he does violence to his feelings to save hurting mine.

He at once handed it back.

“See a job done afore you pay for it, sir,” he said gravely, “and then don’t pay no more’n you can help. This job don’t want paying for at all, it’s no trouble, but a pleasure, sir, as the saying goes.”

He grasped the hoe, swinging it so violently that the earth flew all around us.

I sighed and put back the money. Angus is so terribly literal. Because he will not let me give money to others, he will not let me give it to him. And yet he has rather an affection for money. He told me once that if a man must choose between two vices, drink was preferable to the giving away of money.

After lunch I managed to steal a few words alone with Sophonisba.

“What would you say to leaving Moss End?” I asked.

She turned quite white, and clung to me trembling, “Oh Edward I should die!”

“I only meant for a week or two,” I hastened to explain.

“I should almost die then!”

“But——”

“I was born in Hill Land, and I came to dear old Moss End on my weddin’-day, an’ have been here ever since, an’ ever so happy. I’ve only been away from Hill Land once in my life, an’ I hated it—in London, husband-huntin’, an’ lookin’ so silly——! I couldn’t bear to go away!” She burst into tears.

“But to get rid of uncle?” I implored her, “To come back to our dear old garden of Eden without——”

“The snake? Oh Edward I see! How awfully clever of you!”

“ Well—er—I suggested it to Angus, and he thought it rather a good idea. He said he would see to things and—er—uncle when we were away. That it would be a pleasure. Dorothea wants to do the spring-cleaning simply dreadfully, and he’s going to sort of spring-clean the garden. I fancy they think we might be a trifle in the way, you know, or that they mightn’t be able to make people as comfortable as they could wish. You see how it is ? ”

“ Indeed I do ! Angus is a genius. Suppose there’s nowhere for uncle to sleep, nowhere for him to go an’ lie down an’ rest an’ all that, an’ nothin’ for him to eat ! ” Her eyes began to dance.

“ We must make the best of such misfortunes, ” I said gravely, “ We must bear up in the face of such troubles—to uncles, Sophonisba ! ”

“ I think I shall bear up very nicely, ” she said beaming, “ But we will send all the silver and valuables to the bank, dear. All the servants, including Jane, must go for their holidays. But oh Edward what is to become of us ? ” Her voice faltered.

“ We shall still be together, ” I reminded her, “ More together than we have been for a long time. Uncle is such an interrupter. If he can’t find anything to do I could make him an allowance. ”

“ Charity begins at home—and ends there, ” said Sophonisba in her most decided voice.

“ One can’t be unkind—— ”

“ Can’t one, one can if one tries, an’ it’s worth tryin’ for. I believe in keepin’ one’s own money in one’s own pocket, myself. Life isn’t long enough to be kind to all the world, an’ it’s jolly silly to give oneself a miss ! Husband an’ wife are one, so all you’ve got to do is to be kind to me, then you’re givin’ yourself lots of money an’ things. If we go away I shall buy hats an’

frocks an' all that. They will really be for you of course."

"Thank you, Sophonisba," I said gratefully, "It is awfully nice of you to think of it. We will choose them together. Still, I don't like to think of your uncle without any money."

"Relations without money ought to be hung!" exclaimed Sophonisba crossly, "What good are they to anybody? Where shall we go? What excuse can we make?"

A most brilliant idea struck me, "Why Sophonisba we will go on our honeymoon," I said.

"Angus is a wonder!" she exclaimed awe-struck.

I was hurt. After all, Angus was merely the man who gardens, not the arbiter of our destiny, and surely, as Angus' master, I was worthy of some consideration.

"I thought of that entirely myself," I declared, "I did not even mention it to Angus."

"He would have laughed," she said, "Everybody will laugh. We must not let the people here guess. Of course Pansy will find out—she an' her beastly little birds! People have got accustomed to me here, will they ever get accustomed to me anywhere else? Oh darlin' how long shall we have to stay away? How long will it take Angus to do it?"

"Angus will telegraph when we can return, or at least write—the woman at the post-office tells the admiral all about the telegrams, and she can only say who the letters come from, not what they contain. The minute we get Angus' letter we will return. It won't be long. You know what Angus is, and of course I am giving him a perfectly free hand with the garden."

"Yes, but I know what Uncle is too."

"When Greek meets Greek," I murmured. "Besides it's Fate, Sophonisba."

"Good old Fate!" laughed Sophonisba.

"We shall be allowed to see each other again," I observed thankfully, "honeymooners are always left strictly alone."

"What idiots we are!" she remarked with contentment, "Nobody would think it to look at us—specially at me! After all, it's been pretty awkward sittin' mum when people said where they had been for their honeymoons, an' ask after yours, an' you get red, an' can't think of anythin'. Mrs. Heron hardly seemed to think I could be really respectable, and that she ought to go on knowin' me, when I let out I hadn't been on one an' was never properly married. Of course after thirty, one prefers to feel both safe an' respectable, an' married if possible. Even if one had the looks, one couldn't go on high-kickin' for ever. But what about the boys?"

"We cannot take them on a honeymoon," I said regretfully, "They would be out of place. It would make us seem almost too peculiar, Sophonisba."

"We'll be peculiar all right, whatever we do, or don't do," she lamented, "Still I suppose we can't take them."

"They will be very happy at the vicarage. Everybody adores them."

"But think of the risk! Suppose the poor pater tries to make then 'godly members' an' all that. Have you the heart of a father that you can abandon them to such a fate?"

"Well you know, dear," I said consolingly, "Even you, with all your training, don't find it easy to make them do what they don't want to do."

"And they have brains," she added more cheer-

fully "I'll back them against the poor pater any day. Now go an' tell uncle. Perhaps he'll offer to go, rather than be left alone with Angus."

I found Percy lying on the dining-room sofa, "By the bye," I said, as casually as possible, "I'm—er—going on a honeymoon."

He burst out laughing and dug me in the ribs, "And none has ever earned it more!" he exclaimed, "Good luck, old son, you can trust poor old Percy, all right. He's been there once or twice himself. Who's the gel?"

I stared at him, "Who could it be but Sophonisba?" I gasped.

He laughed till I thought he was never going to stop, "You are the most original man I ever met," he spluttered, "To think of going on a honeymoon after years of matrimony, and with your own wife! It's enough to make a cat laugh."

"I trust you will find everything quite comfortable in our absence," I said courteously, "Of course Dorothea has the spring-cleaning to get through, but I am sure Angus will be always delighted to see you in the garden. He quite understands the situation. Of course if you find the discomfort too much and would rather go——" I paused suggestively.

"What, prove faithless to my trust! Desert in the face of danger! Poor old Percy mayn't be up to much, but you can depend upon him to stick like a limpet. Go away and enjoy yourself, my dear nephew, confident that you will find your faithful watch-dog still on guard on your return. Where are you going, and when?"

Only Angus was to be let into the secret of our destination, and we did not yet know it ourselves. There should be no chance of Percy following us, and quar-

tering himself upon our honeymoon. I had decided just to take tickets to the junction, and let Fate determine the rest.

"We haven't quite settled," I answered, "Naturally we think more of romance and solitude than mere comfort and cooking."

"There's the County Asylum," said Percy, and lying down fell fast asleep again.

Then Pansy, who had somehow heard all about it, descended upon us. She was unspeakably shocked and disgusted.

"Oh Edward and at your age!" were her first words to me, "And my bringing-up! It is almost an indecency—certainly an impropriety! You never thought of such things before you had a libertine to live with you and put you up to things!"

"Really Pansy—" I began in some heat.

"That will do, Edward! Don't be silly! Pause and think before it is too late, you have grown so horribly rash! The whole place has been in a buzz ever since you came to it, and never more so than recently. I met the admiral just now, and he said——"

"I have no wish to hear what he said," I retorted.

"*All* honeymoons are a disappointment either to the bride or to the bridegroom—usually to both."

"Is that what he said," I demanded, "He must be a very ignorant old person."

Pansy went scarlet, "Of course not! I am warning you, Edward. What will people think—say! However are you going to explain it?"

"We shall not explain it," I said loftily, "One can always trust one's neighbours—it seems—to do that."

Again she reddened, "*All* lunatics aren't in asylums," she said shortly.

“How do you know that?” I asked, “Do they tell you they are lunatics, Pansy?”

“One does not require to be told the obvious. I am astonished at Sophonisba. With her figure and all!”

“Sophonisba has a beautiful figure,” I returned, “No one would ever take her for an animated lamp-post.”

“No, they’d be more likely to take her for—but never mind that. You are set on this depravity and eccentricity, I can see that. Something tells me you will regret it bitterly.”

I felt my heart sink at these words. Somehow they sounded ominous—almost prophetic.

I changed the subject.

She changed it again, “I have got such a nice patient,” she said, “Quite a hopeless case.”

“Does he put both legs out of bed, and doesn’t James mind?” asked Sophonisba, who came up just then.

I fled in search of Angus, explaining to him how matters stood, “It seems honeymoons are expected of a man, Angus,” I added feebly in excuse, for he made me feel that I needed one.

“Ay, sir, expected and unexpected. Men have found themselves on honeymoons afore now without any idea of how they got there, only knowing, poor devils, it’s too late to go back.”

“But——”

Angus took no notice, “There’s nothing like presence of mind, sir, and absence of bridegroom, to save oneself from the worst.”

“But——” I began again.

“If there’d been more presence of mind, sir, there’d be fewer unhappy marriages. Save yourself from the

wimmin, sir, and that's all the salvation you want in this world."

"But you don't want to save yourself from the right woman," I laughed, for Angus has very quaint ideas, "Only from the wrong."

"The right 'un becomes the wrong 'un—when she's got yer," said Angus gloomily, and I realised that Dorothea and he had had one of their tiffs, and had not yet arrived at the making-up stage.

"Not always," I said, happy to think of Sophonisba. He went on digging in a disgusted fashion.

"I was aggravated into adoing of mine," he sighed, "never a more aggravating woman stepped than Dorothea! Aggravating blue eyes, aggravating saucy ways, aggravating waist, aggravating yaller hair! And she's got 'em yet—the lot of 'em!"

"I don't think you regret that, Angus," I said. I know that secretly, he is inordinately fond and proud of his pretty wife.

He eluded the challenge. "There's many as is aggravated into it," he went on dourly, "Others as is coaxed and led blind-fold, others as is fair bullied and frightened into it, but if you tell me of a man as did it all on his own, I'll call you a liar, sir, and that man a stoopid fool as deserves all he's got and more!"

Since I did not want to be called either a liar by Angus, or a stupid fool, I said nothing of my own case, and how entirely, and in spite of opposition all round, and Sophonisba's elusive retreat, I had done it myself.

"You'll have all the vallerbles sent to the bank, sir?" he enquired quickly, "I've known folk as could resist anything but temptation, and I ain't one for putting it in their way. Folk is only too ready to hunt hard for it on their own, sir, and they mostly finds it,

they mostly finds it ! But they ain't agoing to find your vallerbles, sir."

Just then Sophonisba, looking very bright and happy, came up to us, " Unfortunately Pansy could not wait any longer," she said, " She had a train to catch. Have you told Angus about us ? "

" I wish you happiness mum, I'm sure," said Angus, " I dunno as you could have done much better for yourself."

" I couldn't—anyhow ! " she declared, " And while we are away you will see to things, to simply everythin' ? If anything should happen to prevent him being here when we come back, well, we will make the best of it, Angus. Sometimes everythin' turns out for the best. Mr. Delland is goin' to leave the key of the wine-cellar with you. Don't order anythin' more. An' don't let Dorothea overwork herself cookin' an' that—as long as you an' she have what you want. He will enjoy the simple life, I'm sure, an' anyway it's very good for the figure, an' the only cure. An' if he does bury his bones in the beds don't throw things at him please, Angus, it does so hurt his feelin's, or if you must throw, please miss. He came in simply yowlin' the other day. An' t'anyrate Dorothea can see to packin' his bag if he leaves in a hurry, an' that the wrong sort of thing doesn't go in it, an' not the new rain-coat. An' if people come here complainin', an' makin' up stories, say he was with you all the time, Angus, as innocent as innocent, waggin' his tail, so that it couldn't possibly have been him—dear little fellow ! "

And Angus said he would be sure to remember.

Then Sophonisba and I wandered away together. I was feeling very gay, quite " fey " as they say. " What a rash young adventurer you have for a husband," I laughed.

She looked at me with shining eyes, her head on one side, "Oh Edward are we wise? Marriage is such an awful risk! An' lots of things said about it are so risky! Do you really think we shall be happy?"

"Oh no," I said, "Not at all! We must just chance it!"

She wriggled, and clasped my arm, "We must not hurry into this thing, dear fiancé, we must weigh the pros and cons carefully. Do not let us be rash. Have you really considered it sufficiently? After all you are only nearly——"

"Oh hush!" I implored her.

"I am not as young as I was—or as slim," she murmured, "Not that I was ever exactly slim. Well, perhaps we had better risk it. I mightn't get another." She bubbled over with laughter.

I bubbled over too. I felt about sixteen, though at that rate Sophonisba would still be two years off being born.

"You are sure you are not marrying me for my money?" she went on.

"Almost certain," I assured her.

"Heaps of wives wouldn't have been wives but for their money," she reminded me solemnly, "I don't want to be that sort, Edward. Promise me!"

I promised.

"Or for my beauty," she laughed more than ever, "Beauty fades."

"Only a little for your beauty, my dear," I said candidly, "I can't be altogether blind to it, you know."

"But you are—at least—well, never mind. But in goodness name, what *are* you marrying me for, you lunatic?"

"Because I'm quite madly in love," I confessed, holding her hand very tightly, "always was, and

always will be, Sophonisba, and because you have such a rare and wonderful character, my dear."

"My wonderful an' rare character," echoed Sophonisba with an explosion of mirth, "What me, Edward! You have got it badly, you poor blind old bat—still its the nicest thing for a husband to be! One thing, with a face an' figure like mine, I can't lose my character—such as it is—even if I wanted to."

"What are you marrying me for?" I demanded nervously, "Entirely for my money?"

"Oh entirely!" she exclaimed, "What else? Such a good match, so clever of me to get you—everybody said so! Do you think we shall have a family, or shouldn't I mention it? Do stop me if I am bein' indelicate. I shouldn't mind a couple of boys myself, as long as they didn't stammer or drawl. If I have a daughter, Edward, I shall strangle it, poor little beast!"

I laughed—and sighed. I have never been able to understand Sophonisba's antipathy to the idea of a daughter. I should have been so enormously proud of her. But perhaps it is not good for one to have quite everything.

"Darlin' I would have married you if you had been an—an—"

She paused for an illustration, and just then one rose in the far distance, and then disappeared—a very awful illustration.

"A dustman, even when you were doin' it," she concluded, and flung herself into my arms.

I picked us both out of the flower-bed, and tried to make the precious seedlings stand up again and look as if nothing had happened.

"Oh dear," sighed Sophonisba, half-laughing, half-crying, "I forget that because my heart is light, my

body isn't. Are you much hurt? What will Angus say? The fowls will have to have got out again, and that's all there is about it. And Pansy says the fowls are no use to us, but then Pansy will say anythin'!"

We parted from the boys and Satan—it was very awful—and arrived at the junction, and there my poor travel-tossed Sophonisba gave way a little.

"I feel just like an animal that's lost it's ark," she confessed. "Oh, Edward, we've left the garden of Eden behind us, an' perhaps we'll get paid out for not waitin' to be turned out like Adam an' Eve, an' a snake loose in it an' all, an' Satan so lonely. I've never been out in the world before. People will laugh." She seemed quite panic-stricken, and people turned to stare in amazement.

"We're off on our honeymoon, and going to be very very happy," I said in a determined voice, for I was feeling rather odd myself, like something that had been violently uprooted and transplanted to foreign soil.

"I have a presentiment that somethin' dreadful is goin' to happen, an' nothin' be the same again. Suppose—suppose we go back before it is too late, Edward?"

Alas! I did not listen! What I should have been saved if I had!

"The bride mustn't leave the bridegroom on the wedding-journey," I said, "It simply isn't done, Sophonisba. Think how silly I should look going on a honeymoon alone."

"Could you look sillier than you do now, than we both do?" she asked huskily, "It's the women I'm most scared of. Lookin' down their noses at me like the bishop in that dream. They'll think I've got the money, that's plain. Oh dear! Oh dear! I didn't know goin' on a honeymoon felt like this! I thought

one hoped to enjoy it. How wise we were not to go on one before, an' what perfect idiots to be goin' on one now, an' makin' laughin' stocks of ourselves ! Do stop all those people starin' an' gigglin' ! Even if we bear up, what of our blessed boys left to their fate ? What of Satan—dear little fellow ? ”

“ Oh they will look after themselves and get plenty of fun out of things, you'll soon see. They always do ! ”

“ But they are so dreadfully conscientious at the vicarage,” she complained, “ They will start trainin' them, an' things. Then there's the poor pater, an' you know what he is——. How can we be sure that Edward the Second with his stammer, an' Billium with his drawl, will ever get away in time.”

“ We can trust them to manage that,” I said confidently, “ And surely it is better than Percy and his example.”

“ I'm not so sure, better a knave than a fool anyday. Suppose the pater shuts them up with him in the study. Will they have sense to get out of the window before he begins, as we did ? An' I had to tell the poor helpless darlin's to be good an' obedient, trustin' to luck they wouldn't over-do it.”

“ I'm sure they won't, dear.”

“ Talk of wicked uncles, I feel like the babes in the wood, only more so, an' there won't be any birds to cover us up with leaves, they'll be far too busy scootin' off to Pansy, the nasty meddlin' little things. Edward, if anythin' happens on our honeymoon, Pansy will know all about it, an' say ‘ I told you so ! ’ Oh dear, trains keep goin' an' goin'. What are we to do ? ”

“ We must go in one,” I said firmly.

“ But we can't just pop in one an' go anywhere an' trust to luck, they make you have tickets with where you're goin' to on. Oh how dreadful everythin' is ! ”

“ Well all we’ve got to do is to think of somewhere to go,” I began cheerfully.

“ By the time we’ve thought of it, there won’t be any trains left——”

I got up feeling most determined. Sophonisba grabbed me with a faint shriek, “ Oh, Edward, don’t look like that ! It makes your mouth so funny, an’ people are laughin’ as it is. Whatever are you goin’ to do ? ” She sank her voice to a dread whisper.

“ I am going to buy tickets,” I said heroically, “ Nothing shall stop me, Sophonisba.”

“ You are so brave ! ” she murmured awe-struck, “ But don’t do it, darlin’, somethin’ awful might happen, we might lose each other, or somethin’. Suppose you just took tickets back again.”

“ Sophonisba be brave, that cannot be. We have set forth on this rash adventure and we must carry it through. I won’t be long,” and I walked straight up to the ticket-office.

People very kindly made way for me. They seemed interested in my venture, I thought.

“ I want two tickets,” I began very firmly indeed.

“ To where ? ” asked the booking-clerk impatiently.

“ Two single first-class,” I added.

“ Where to if you please ? ”

“ That is immaterial,” I managed to say carelessly, “ give me the best you have for a guinea. Two first single guinea tickets if you please.”

The booking-clerk disappeared abruptly, and presently the station-master pushed his way through the crowd and got into the place with the booking-clerk, and made strange stifled noises. Finally they took my two guineas and gave me my tickets.

I pushed through the crush to Sophonisba, and showed her them in some triumph, but she dashed my

ardour by remarking, "You can get almost as good for tuppence. At least they look much the same though they may be shoddy for all I know. Is there a train for them?"

I asked the station-master, and he said there was, and put us and our luggage in it, and told us not to get out till the guard told us.

"How beautifully simple it is after all, Sophonisba," I said.

"I only hope it'll prove so," she shivered.

The train moved out of the station. We were off—to goodness knows where!

"Hurrah!" I cried, and waved my hat out of the window, "Hurrah for a honeymoon at last!"

"Don't be silly!" said Sophonisba very crossly.

"But it's the happiest day of my life! Wave your handkerchief, and say 'hurrah,' too!"

Sophonisba had other uses for her handkerchief. "Of all the silly ideas, this is the silliest an' the rottenest you ever thought of," she wept, "An' you made us publicly ridiculous at the junction. I feel homesick. Oh Edward, how could you!"

"My dearest," I began helplessly.

"I'm beginnin' to miss Moss End already," she sobbed, "Shall we ever see it again? Will our boys be little dears, or beastly little curates, by the time we get back? Will Satan be able to go on waggin'—dear little fellow! And suppose we never see uncle again either! Oh lend me your handkerchief, I have used this up!"

I let her use mine up also.

I could not feel our honeymoon had started under the best auspices.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DISAPPOINTMENTS OF A HONEYMOON

AT the first stop the guard came and unlocked the carriage and said we were to be sure to get out at the next station.

“Why does he treat us as if we were idiots or incapables?” asked Sophonisba indignantly of me, “I shan’t get out at the next station unless it’s name is the one for the tickets. What is the name?”

“Sea-Swell,” I said rather despondently, for I didn’t care much for the name myself.

“Sea-swell, or Sea-smell?” demanded Sophonisba tartly.

I handed her the tickets.

“Well I hope it won’t be all sea, or smell, either,” she exclaimed, “an’ that there’ll be a bit of land to sit quiet on now an’ then.”

Sea-swell turned out to be an enormous station crowded with very fashionable-looking people. “We are going to see life, Sophonisba,” I sighed.

She glared at the people, and made no reply.

“It will rub the rust off,” I went on, more cheerfully than ever.

“So you’ve been hankerin’ after smart people an’ things all this time! Well I should have guessed it! It was bound to come sooner or later. Of course you took care that those two guinea tickets were goin’ to

take us to a Brighton sort of place. You might have said so instead of pretendin'. People seem to take us for a free circus!" She looked at herself in the glass, and, with a disgusted expression, banged her hat over one eye, completely extinguishing it, "That's the latest thing, it seems."

"I don't like it," I said very decidedly, "and you can't use that eye at all."

"As if that matters when it's fashion! As if anythin' matters—gapin' idiots!"

"They recognise us as honeymooners," I returned, helping her out of the carriage.

She muttered something I could not catch, "An' now," she went on, "What's goin' to happen? Are we to squat on the platform for the rest of our lives? Talk of marriage bein' nothing but surprises—so it is, an' all of 'em unpleasant surprises! You have got quite a different expression already! Anybody could tell we had been married for years! Why don't you get an hotel or somethin'?"

"Certainly, certainly," I said, "Just what I am about to do, Sophonisba."

I felt rather fussed all the same. There did not seem any hotel quite handy. However it was easy to get a taxi-cab—it was quite a little London as far as taxi-cabs were concerned—and tell the driver to take us to the best hotel.

I was however saved even that trouble, for a pale perky lad came up to us, with "Esplanade Hotel" on his cap, and touching it, pointed to our luggage, "I'll see it goes on," he said, "will you take your seats inside?" He held open the door of a large hotel 'bus.

I put Sophonisba in, and was just following myself, when another pale and perky lad, almost the exact counterpart of the other rushed up, and addressed me

earnestly, "Don't you go there, sir," he whispered, "they takes you in an' does for you somethink awful. Our bills is half an' our comfort double." He pointed to his cap, where "West-End Hotel" was printed.

But our first captor pushed him aside, and me into the 'bus, and gave the driver the signal to start, "Don't you know 'igh-class folk when you see 'em," he shouted to the other, "do you think they would demean themselves agoin' near your low stinkin' little pub!"

"Ho hindeed," retorted the insulted, "well our pub ain't come down to takin' in freaks anyway!"

I laughed, rather amused at this passage of arms, but Sophonisba did not even smile, "There I knew it!" she gasped despairingly, "even the very hotel boys! As for the other visitors, I can hardly bear to think of them! Oh, Edward, need you have gone out of your way to make me ridiculous!"

"I have never pretended to be handsome," I returned, perhaps a trifle sharply, "but it has never occurred to me that I am actually ridiculous. If people stared—and they did stare—it was at you, not at me!"

"Well you needn't go throwin' that in my face, an' me on my beastly honeymoon an' all! There, my hat's gone wrong again!" She dragged at it violently.

"Why you've pulled it right down, one can hardly see your face at all!" I exclaimed.

"Well my face is my own business, an' I'll thank you to leave it alone. So this is the hotel! A palace with millions starin'! I might have known that's the sort of place you would choose! They say a woman never knows a man till she's married him; seems to me that the longer she's been married to him, the less she knows him! Well, we've got to go through with it

somehow," she plunged out of the 'bus, and made for the hotel steps, but owing to her vision being obscured by her hat, missed them, and rolled down several.

"Are you hurt?" I asked anxiously.

"I wish I was dead!" was her amazing reply, "If you didn't hear them gigglin', *I* did! Look at that boy, simply scarlet tryin' to keep his face! Still, it's no more than I expected. Here's the manager, more like a bishop than anythin', he's serious enough t'any-rate!"

The bishop—or rather the manager—greeted us suavely, and happened just to have his best bedroom and dressing-room unlet, but Sophonisba's demand for a private sitting-room could not be met, and we had to make the best of it.

Then he bowed and withdrew. The luggage was carried in, and we went into the large lounge-hall where tea was in progress. The visitors stopped eating and chatting to stare at us, and then returned very hurriedly to their former occupations. Standing leaning up against a pillar, was a young man who struck me as the very coolest being I had ever met. His clothes were cool, his attitude, his eyes, his stare, everything about him, and it would be idle to deny I took an instant dislike to him. He looked at me with utter and cool indifference, and then his eyes fell on Sophonisba, and he started, and stared, as if he had never seen anyone in the least like her before. I could see he was 'knocked all in a heap' by Sophonisba—as the saying is—and I could not of course wonder, though I did not like him any the more for it.

It was the first time since my marriage that I had been tortured by the green-eyed monster, and I wished I had let the other boy have us.

I was so intent trying to stare down the cool young

man who made believe I was not there at all—that there was nobody there but Sophonisba—that I did not notice I was walking into somebody till I collided with something, and turning to apologise, found myself looking into a pair of charming black eyes under wonderful golden hair. The owner of hair and eyes was a slight elegant woman very exquisitely dressed, who accepted my apologies with the most delightful smile. It was odd to feel at once that in this fair woman I had found a friend, and yet I did feel it.

Then I followed Sophonisba who was hurrying up the stairs.

“I knew what it would be,” she said as soon as we were alone, “but of course it can’t be helped now, and we must make the best of it. I suppose I shall have to start off on the fashionable track at once. But these tight skirts——” she sighed in a dispirited fashion and sat down, “Have you lots of money with you, Edward? We must shop to-morrow. I’m not goin’ to let them suppose I come out of the ark when I’ve got a husband with a *private* income of five thousand a year, and if they go on lookin’ down their noses at me, I shall mention it too, t’anyrate they shan’t think I’ve got the cash. I expect they are just livin’ on Stock Exchange earnin’s an’ things like that, which may go pop at any moment an’ serve them right! If we were at Moss End now, we’d be just wanderin’ round the garden watchin’ things grow an’ that.” She got out her handkerchief and blew her nose.

“We are going to enjoy ourselves enormously,” I stated with great decision.

“Speak for yourself, Edward, please.”

That evening it poured, and the management, who simply will not allow it’s guests to find time hang heavy on it’s hands, got up a hasty bridge tournament.

I was drawn with the lady of black eyes and golden hair, and Sophonisba with the cool young man. He lounged up against a pillar and told her he was delighted at his good luck, and asked her if we kept a motor, and proceeded to talk for hours about his own, quite the most wonderful car that had ever been achieved, it seems. He asked Sophonisba to come out in it the first fine afternoon, and she said she would. He did not ask me. He said that people without cars were pretty well the limit, he thought, and an hotel like the Esplanade had no right to take them in and expect the other visitors to mix with them upon an equality. When Sophonisba said, that though we could keep a car if we wished, we had not as yet decided to do so, he owned there were exceptions, and that people who didn't keep one as a matter of choice, and not as a matter of necessity, were on a very different level from those who did not keep them because of the very low reason of L s. d. "There's hope for the 'won't,' " he was good enough to say, "but the 'can't' are simply beyond the pale."

Personally I would prefer being beyond the pale than within it with the cool young man.

If it had not been for the kindness and sympathy of my own partner, that first evening of our honeymoon would have been too ghastly for words; as it was I managed to get through it somehow, and even made a pretence of enjoying myself.

"All men are the same," exclaimed Sophonisba as soon as we were alone, then checked herself, and added hastily, "Oh dear that sounded just like one of Pansy's! But fancy you havin' such a comin' on disposition, Edward! Grass widows don't let the grass grow under their feet, that's certain! Glad you enjoyed yourself, I'm sure. Nothin' like makin' up for a dull time. Of

course she does it artistically, still it's done—black eyes, gold hair, red lips ; they don't all grow on the same bush, though men think they do, but then men think what those sort of women mean them to think. An' the way she showed off her figure too, the swank of these tall slim women—disgustin' ! They might own the earth to look at 'em, an' for all we know she mayn't even own a husband. You never know with grass widows."

"Do you mean the husband of my partner is somewhere abroad, dear ?" I asked interested.

Sophonisba sniffed, "Says he is."

"Well he ought to know surely——"

"*She* says he is. Very convenient—havin' a husband abroad." She sounded almost envious, I thought. A horrible suspicion darted into my mind. My presence interfered with her friendship with the cool young man. His state of mind was only too plain ; he could hardly take his eyes off her ; he hung on every word, and all the time there was a sort of amazed joy in his eyes. I could not wonder at it, I did not wonder at it, no one could look at Sophonisba unmoved, but it did not make it any better for me. I was so many years older than my lovely young wife, plain, dull, sometimes I have even feared, dense, and the cool young man was young. Youth to youth, it is Nature's law, one we may not go against, and it was a law that left me out of it. I sighed heavily, "I am glad you were well entertained," I said.

"Yes, kept me nicely out of the way didn't it ?" Then her face flushed with excitement, "Oh Edward guess who he is, but you never will ! It's too wonderful, an' takin' it all so simply !"

I thought of various improbabilities. Some young duke ? That might account for his supercilious cool-

ness and superiority. Some 'serene' highness? He was certainly serene enough for anything.

"He is incog.?" I asked unwillingly.

"Oh Edward he's Bung's Brewery!" she exclaimed. I could only stare.

"Enormously rich. An only child. You drink it yourself."

I decided to do so no longer.

"You swear by it."

I resolved henceforth to swear by other gods.

"Bung's Brewery! Oh Edward!"

"Mr. Bung the Brewer," I murmured absently, "Or would it be Master Bung, Sophonisba?"

The boys are very much attached to a game they call "Happy Families," and which we are frequently compelled to play with them. I understand everybody has played it in the days of his youth. I had never done so, but then, till Sophonisba married me, I had no youth. Possibly if I had had more practice, I would have been a little better at the problem of collecting together the Mister and Missus, Master and Miss, of each family—Bones the Butcher, Block the Barber, Bunn the Baker, and so on. As it was, one after the other, my families and portions of families, were wrested from me. They never happened to have the member I asked for, then I lost my turn, and they got my collection instead.

"If you please Sophonisba," I said with a lightness I was far from feeling, "I will trouble you for Master Bung the Brewer."

Would she give him up?

She at once told me not to be silly, and added mechanically, "I haven't got Master Bung the Brewer, but I will trouble you for——"

I was too shocked to allow her to continue. I saw it all now.

"I know why I always lose," I said bitterly, "You cheat, Sophonisba. So does Edward the Second. So does Billium."

Sophonisba went awfully pink, "We don't!" she said at once, "How can you! Poor darlin's they expect to win at their age, an' I've got to help them. Talkin' about——"

I was determined however not to talk about the cool young man if it could be helped. He did so much of that himself; he was one of those talkers who never run down. His subject never varied, motors, and the perfect curse pedestrians were becoming to the quiet country roads.

"If I cheated *I* should win," I stated with the more firmness that I wasn't so sure.

Sophonisba laughed in rather an insulting fashion, "No, you wouldn't," she said, "You'd only get found out an' look silly. His parents are quite elderly, an' he's the only child. Isn't it too rippin' for words? His brewery——"

"Why isn't he brewing now?"

"He doesn't brew himself! How can you be so silly!"

"I suppose he picks hops or adds up accounts or something?" I returned coldly, "Whatever it is he does do, why isn't he doing it now, Sophonisba?"

"Because he's quite above all that sort of thing," she answered triumphantly, "As I should think you might see for yourself! He's absolutely refined in everyway. He pays people to do everythin', an' takes the profits."

"Quite the gentleman!" I quoted sardonically. The cool young man made me feel like that—and more.

"Oh Edward don't make faces with your mouth

like that, it makes you look so funny, an' anyway you needn't sneer. He's been to Oxford——"

"Happy Oxford!" I murmured.

She took no notice. "An' they don't live in the place where the mill is, but quite close here in a lovely old manor with acres of glass-houses——"

"Then I mustn't throw stones, I presume, Sophonisba."

She looked at me anxiously, "Don't you feel well, dear? I've never known you go on like this before, but then I haven't known grass-widows either, thank goodness! He has a huge allowance, an' will be simply rollin' when his people die which may be anytime." She spoke as if the sooner the better.

"What is all this to you?" I asked, and perhaps there was a dangerous edge to my voice.

"Lots would have put on side," she went on too engrossed in her subject to answer my question, "but there's nothin' of that sort of thing about him. He neither thrusts the Brewery down your throat or ignores it. He might be simply a nobody to hear him! An' the way he said, so simply, no side or anythin', 'I am Bung—Bung's Brewery, you know,' just as if he might have been anybody."

"And is he? I meant is that a frightfully swagger sort of thing to be? Does it make a bad second to a V. C. or a prime minister, or a royal duke, or a famous novelist or artist, and so on?"

"There's nothin' to be sarcastic about in a quarter of a million, Edward. Unmarried young men with huge fortunes don't grow on every bush, an' he's not goin' to slip through my fingers if I can help it——"

I gasped. I could not believe my ears had heard aright. Sophonisba to say this—and to me!

She went on as if she had said nothing out of the way,

“ An’ that’s nothin’ to what he will have when the old parents die which is sure to be soon now. Why, it’s enough for the lot of them, let alone one. An’ so nice, an’ that, so cool——”

“ Oh cool enough, I grant you ! ” I agreed.

“ Why be so snorty, Edward ? I see you have taken one of your silly prejudices against him. I suppose you’ve heard that before you turned up he was very friendly with the widow-person.”

“ I do not believe she would permit such a friendship——”

“ I knew it ! Just like a man ! However she’s not goin’ to have him now if I can help it. I have another use for him myself.”

“ It’s very kind of you to tell me this,” I said satirically, “ Anything else you think I had better know, Sophonisba ? ”

“ Now you’re makin’ faces again, an’ your mouth goin’ up all anyhow ! Then you object to the idea ? I thought you would be pleased. It’s so simple—at least I hope it’s goin’ to be simple. I wanted you to help me, but if you won’t, you’re not to interfere—so there ! ”

“ As a mere husband I have of course no right to make any objection,” I began.

“ Then don’t make it ! ” she interrupted.

“ But I say most distinctly I don’t like it, and can’t be expected to like it, and what’s more I’m hanged if I’m going to put up with it ! ”

Sophonisba stared at me with her mouth open as if she thought I had taken leave of my senses, “ Then lump it,” she said at length in a tone she had never used to me before, “ I consider it’s an opportunity it would be a crime to miss, an’ I’m jolly well not goin’ to miss it ! ”

“The cool young man—” I began.

“His name is Ernest Bung.”

“He may have come into the world in the ordinary way, he may have parents,—I neither know nor care,—but to me he will always be the cool young man,” I declared vehemently.

“You’re a nice sort of person to go on a honeymoon with,” she burst out, “I seem to have left the real Edward behind, and got left with an impostor. Perhaps you had better go.”

I went, banging the door after me. It was the first day of our honeymoon—and our first quarrel. Downstairs in the smoke-room the cool young man made an effort to enter into conversation. I shut him up; courteously I hope, still, I shut him up.

“I was only goin’ to tell you about her speed limit,” he said, and added triumphantly, “she hasn’t one.”

“How unfortunate,” I observed, “why don’t you have one made?” and went to the other side of the room. I did not want to hear about the car in which the cool young man proposed to drive my wife. I did not want to hear about the manufactory either, or anything that was his.

When I left the smoking-room, I looked in upon Sophonisba on my way to my dressing-room, “have you everything you want, dearest?” I asked bending over her.

She jerked the sheet over her face. “Of all the tosh—honeymoons!” she said in a muffled voice.

And I was minded to agree with her.

CHAPTER XV

SHOPPING ON A HONEYMOON

WHEN I got down to breakfast next morning, I found the pretty black-eyed woman at our table. She said she hoped I should not mind, but there was no room, it seemed, and there had had to be a case of 'general post.' I said the gain was mine, and we chatted very pleasantly together.

Then Sophonisba come in followed by the cool young man who actually had the cheek to sit down at our table as if he owned it. So Sophonisba had cast down the gauntlet by asking that aristocratic manufacturer to take his meals with us ! I turned to my neighbour, ignoring my wife and her cavalier, perhaps she would be satisfied now. She at least had him all to herself. The widow gave him a very formal bow indeed, and I did not bow at all. He was just as cool as if he had perceived no snub, and began to talk his endless motor talk with Sophonisba who listened entranced. I certainly did not believe Mrs. Harrip had ever allowed him to pour such rubbish into her pretty ears. She was the most sensible woman I had ever met. I could see what she thought of the cool young man, and it wasn't much.

In the smoking-room after breakfast he made another attempt to enter into conversation, "Pretends not to mind, but I know 'em better than that. Treated me cool as you please, and then gives me the chuck for

the first bounder that turns up. Well, it's little I care, and I'll show her too! Besides it ain't genuine, an' she's a bit of a rusher. Top-speed all the time."

I did not know whether he was talking of Sophonisba, Mrs. Harrip, or his car, and I did not enquire. I walked away.

"Jealous old buster," I heard him murmur.

And to think that Sophonisba actually encouraged his intentions! It made me doubt her good taste, it made me doubt everything. Why had she married me for instance? She was young and lovely, I middle-aged, plain, short, stout, and dull. She was poor, I was rich.

"Damn money!" I said.

"Not much!" said a voice, "jolly useful. How d'yer keep a car without?" It was the cool young man again.

I left the smoking-room. In the hall I found Mrs. Harrip, who smilingly invited me to take the seat by her, which I gratefully did.

"I kept it for you," she said moving away her pretty frilly frock, "that dreadful young man will never take a hint, but there isn't any room for him now, is there?" And she laughed.

I laughed too.

"Do you know he will just sit on my frock as cool as a cucumber?"

"Abominable," I agreed. Where was he now? In the drawing-room with Sophonisba? Sitting on her frock perhaps?

"Oh—— and I thought you were here to defend me from the dragon." She gave a little cry of dismay.

I sat down again. Perhaps Sophonisba was upstairs, and anyway I could not leave this charming woman at the young man's mercy.

"It does so spoil your frock," she sighed, and shook out her little frills.

"But yours is new,—new and lovely," I said.

"Ah that is too kind of you! You are a sad flatterer, I fear. An old rag like this!" She smoothed down the little frills, all frothy they were, like a pale sea in colour, and clinging close to slender perfection, and dainty feet in dark green shoes and stockings. She had a frilly hat, dark green too, and her eyes looked wonderful under it. She had been walking on the terrace, getting dreadfully sunburnt, she feared.

Her face is very pale, her lips very red. There was no sign of sunburn, and I said as much.

"Well freckles then," she sighed, "there's always a nasty little one that will come just here." She touched the corner of her mouth with a dainty forefinger, "Hasn't it come after all? Can't you *really* see it?"

I bent my head and looked very hard, but I could not see it, and said as much. I could only see how very red her lips were, how black her eyes, and gold her hair.

Then Sophonisba came up to us, and Mrs. Harrip gave a little start and jumped up hurriedly, "Sorry to interrupt," said Sophonisba to me.

"You weren't " I said rising thankfully. The cool young man was nowhere to be seen.

"What were you lookin' for in Mrs. Harrip's eyes?" she enquired, "The devil? Did it need much findin'?"

I was annoyed, "I was not looking at her eyes, I was looking at her mouth, or rather——"

"I see."

"It was only a freckle," I began in some confusion, for it was so difficult to explain.

"Pansy always said you were either idiotically innocent, or deep as the devil," snorted Sophonisba, "I

said you weren't deep ; but now I begin to think you are."

"I would as soon be considered deep as idiotically innocent," I retorted with some annoyance.

"I am always forgettin' that up to forty you lived like a monk, never saw women, never went anywhere," she murmured, "I suppose this is really your first experience of the world, the flesh, an' the devil, as well as mine. Well, I hope trouble won't come of it, that's all, but it's not my idea of a honeymoon."

"It certainly isn't mine !"

Sophonisba looked at me softly, and touched my arm, "You old silly," she breathed, "what's gone wrong ? Would you rather talk to me than that creature after all ?"

"Of course I would—only you mustn't call her a creature, dear, she's a very charming woman."

"I can't call black white even to please you, Edward, but never mind her, never mind anybody. After all it *is* our honeymoon, an' can't last much longer, thank goodness ! Let's go an' shop. I haven't a single thing to wear."

I reminded her she had brought some boxes full of things to wear.

"Coverins, not clothes," she insisted, "an' creations aren't in it here. It's worse than the pictures you see of Bond street,—because it's more so. You must buy me a creation, Edward."

I announced my willingness to buy up the whole world of creations. "With frothy little frills," I suggested.

"An' me in 'em ! What a creation it will be to be sure !" She burst out laughing. "An' what coloured frills ?"

I pointed to the sea, "Just like that," I said, "how

lovely you will look, Sophonisba, and how delightful to buy such a frock together ! And a hat, a green hat, oh, and green shoes and stockings too ! ”

Sophonisba bit her lip. My taste did not seem to please her, “ I look a fright in green,” she said shortly.

I repudiated such an absurd idea, “ You look the same in everything,” I declared.

“ I know that, worse luck ! Well, here’s a swagger shop enough. Good Heavens what clothes ! How am I to get into ’em ? What trouble relations an’ things can make for one just for want of a little thought. All owin’ to uncle, an’ him quite a nice harmless person, really delightful if he were anybody else’s relation. He’s driven us out of our own house an’ garden, he’s made us go on a horrid honeymoon, he’s makin’ you waste your money on togs for me, an’ makin’ me look goodness knows what in ’em ! Oh uncle will have somethin’ to answer for an’ no mistake when he comes to die, an’ I hope he gets it hot, that’s all ! ”

She paused for breath.

I had forgotten Percy Kearness. Compared with the cool young man, whom I could not forget,—try as I would,—he seemed a small enough evil.

“ Well I suppose I must go in an’ risk them laughin’ ! What a gorgeous day it would be in the garden, an’ the dear boys tumblin’ out of trees, pickin’ things they shouldn’t, an’ sittin’ in the puddles ! It makes one feel so homesick ! ” She got out her handkerchief and blew her nose. I had never known Sophonisba have such a use for her handkerchief as upon our honeymoon.

I sighed. Sophonisba was not the only one to feel homesick.

“ I believe I could kiss Pansy ! ” she burst out suddenly, “ An’ say I was glad she had taken us by surprise ! ”

"But you always do kiss—" I began.

"I mean without wantin' to bite instead, an' sayin' it an' *almost* meanin' it, Edward. Oh dear, oh dear. It seems a lifetime ago since the fowls got out!"

"It was only yesterday," I reminded her.

"One doesn't count by time, one counts by experience an' sufferin', an' to me it seems like an eternity or one of the poor pater's sermons, somethin' that's never goin' to end. When shall we see the boys again, an' after all they are our children? Are you sure Angus will be able to manage—manage the—the garden an' all that! Will he let us know the moment he's gone?"

"Of course he will. He will write the very second; he promised."

"There are snakes everywhere. She-ones are the worst. Oh why did you drag me to this place? Better an uncle at Moss End than a widow here!"

I was startled. "I feel quite well," I said, "and I'm still in my prime, dear, even if in your eyes I seem rather old."

"You old! You are the youngest thing I know. At times I feel as if I was wheelin' you out in a pram, and I am steeped in worldly wickedness an' knowledge. What rot we're talkin'! Wait a minute while I pop in an' see if there's anythin' to fit." She disappeared.

I waited more than a good many minutes, but she did emerge at length, looking tired and flushed, I thought.

"You've got a creation then?" I asked.

"Oh Edward I don't know what I've got, an' I don't know that I much mind. They have to make it specially, an' it was so tryin'. What are you starin' at the hairdresser's for?"

I was studying the latest style in hair-dressing, and

liked it. It was coils and coils at the back, and done in a great heap of natural curls in the front. It was like Mrs. Harrip's, and very becoming, I thought.

I pointed it out to my dear girl, "I wish you would do your hair in all those lovely coils, Sophonisba," I urged her, "instead of in a little bit on the top."

Sophonisba stared at me and at the waxen image, "But," she began, and paused and sighed. "Why is it never ginger in shops," she demanded, "but always gold or a lovely brown? Disgustin'! An' why always fashions for people with crowds, an' never for people with—so you admire it, do you? It might be Mrs. Harrip. Perhaps it is." She laughed and turned away.

"It would suit you done like that, dearest," I returned, "to please me, because we are on our honeymoon, and one only has one honeymoon after all."

"I've known people who had several one way or another," she returned drily, "what of that silly political Mr. Pottle; he's had three?"

"Two of them wouldn't count," I said.

"It would be the last that counted most," said Sophonisba, "It's always the live ass that counts."

"Then you will do it like that, just to please me? It wouldn't be so much more trouble, would it?"

She stared in the window, "It might be less," she owned.

Then she remembered a book she wanted, and asked me to go into the next street to get it,—as she knew they had it in the shop there,—while she called in at the chemists for some cold cream.

It took me some time to get the book, and when I came back Sophonisba was hurrying to the chemists, or at least so I thought.

"Then you haven't got it?" I said.

"Of course I've got it, though it wasn't easy to match—I mean—what a time you were, Edward!"

"Give me the parcel to carry," I asked holding out my hand.

"How silly you are!" She looked at me angrily, "What parcel? I haven't got any parcel." And I saw that she hadn't.

"The cold cream," I said.

"I'm just goin' to get it."

I was amazed she had not got it before, there had been so much time, but accompanied her inside and bought the cream and slipped it into my pocket. Sophonisba had a pocket in her dress I knew, but of course she would not put cold cream in it, and it did mine no harm. Though Sophonisba uses a great deal of cold cream, specially on her nose, she does not in the least need it. Her complexion is unique.

"I shouldn't wonder if people think it's too good to be true," I said smiling, and thinking what a specially pretty pink she was.

"People are suspicious evil-minded beasts," she exclaimed, "always thinkin' it is, when it isn't, and it isn't, when it is."

I did not quite follow the subtlety of this remark, but I told Sophonisba I absolutely agreed with her, and we went back cheerfully to the hotel. There was something to be said in favour of honeymoons after all.

A few days later the new frock came home, and I found Sophonisba taking it out of the box, "Well?" she asked holding it up.

"Lovely," I at once exclaimed.

"Wait till you see me in it," she returned flinging it down on her bed, "Talk about bein' a sight for sore eyes, I shall blind 'em I shouldn't wonder." She seemed in no hurry to try it on.

“You will wear it to-night,” I urged, “and do your hair in the new way to match, won’t you? You promised, you know.”

Sophonisba went very pink, “How did you guess that I was goin’ in for the whole hog to-night. I wish it was over.” She looked at herself in the glass, and then hurried away. There is no vanity about Sophonisba; she never looks long in a glass, and often I almost think she would prefer not to look at all.

“I will help you,” I said generously. At Moss End Dorothea fastens up Sophonisba’s frocks. They both laugh at me, and say I hook and button them wrong, but they always looked fairly right to me.

“If I want you, I’ll knock,” she returned, “and mind you’re not to come in on any account till I knock at your door.”

It seemed to me that evening that I waited a long time for the expected knock, that it was never coming, and that she had forgotten all about the arrangement. However she did knock at length, and I went in.

Her face was pinker than I had ever seen it, and she had done her hair in the new way—heaps of coils at the back. It made her look very fashionable, and yet, secretly, I was disappointed; she was somehow not quite the old Sophonisba, and it was the old Sophonisba I wanted, and always would want. However, I was very enthusiastic over the effect, and she said she was glad I was pleased at least.

“Pity one can’t get a whole rig out when one’s at it,” she said impatiently, and felt her face, “though goodness knows where I’d start. I thought I looked a holy show, an’ that any one could twig in a shot. Just pull these, will you?”

She handed me two string things that were hanging down over her petticoat. I wondered what they were.

I pulled and something resisted stoutly.

"Oh go on!" cried Sophonisba, "I can't feel that!"

Then I realised it was part of Sophonisba that resisted, her waist-part, and was grieved to think she had taken to tight-lacing to obtain the slim figure of the day,—a ridiculous scraggy thing that I did not in the least admire.

"Dearest, need you?" I asked.

"Of course I need, if I'm to get into that beastly creation-thing. Don't be silly, and do put a little strength into it."

I tugged vigorously, "But doesn't it hurt? Can you bear it?"

"Never mind that. I suppose I've got my self-respect same as other women if I do look so different outside. I'll get into that wretched thing if I die in the effort, an' that's all there is about it." "Wretched" was not exactly the word she used, but it expresses her meaning well enough I think.

She got pinker and pinker, and at last I refused to put her to any further torture. "It's ridiculous to make frocks so tight!" I exclaimed.

"Well let's see if it'll meet now."

It wouldn't quite, but one way and another, we got it to look all right. It was a very fashionable dress, and Sophonisba of course looked beautiful, and a very swell person indeed, and yet somehow it made me want the old Sophonisba and the old simple pretty dresses all the more. She seemed farther away from me in her magnificence.

She glared at herself in the glass, "I only want a diamond tiara and a few other trifles of that nature to be the what-do-you-call-it? of all eyes. Still, I dare say I shall manage *that* all right. Now let's go down and get it over. The gong has gone."

We went down, and certainly Sophonisba was the cynosure of all eyes. Nobody looked at anybody else. I felt sure they noticed everything, even the new style in hairdressing. Nobody stared harder than the cool young man who made no effort to conceal his admiration. "By Jove she takes the biscuit, and no mistake," I heard him murmur breathlessly to himself, "If it isn't pretty well the limit!"

As a rule Sophonisba has quite a nice appetite, but on this occasion she ate very little, and when I urged her to take this or that, rather angrily told me not to be tiresome.

"There isn't a spare inch anywhere," she sighed, and sat very bolt up-right on her chair, "an' as it is, the soufflé has been too much for the middle hook. Oh I've never envied a fashionable woman in my life, but I envy them less than ever now!"

After dinner she went upstairs to have a quiet read, but I found she had taken off her frock and corsets, and was sitting in the chair by the window with a plate of cake, and a glass of lemonade.

"Oh Edward," she exclaimed, "I do believe this is the very happiest moment of my life!"

"And you've done your hair in a little bit on the top again," I said pleased, "I like it best like that after all, just as I like you in your less fashionable frocks, and not going in so much in the middle."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Sophonisba fervently.

CHAPTER XVI

THE THIRD IN THE HONEYMOON

I'M sure a looker-on would think Sophonisba was on her honeymoon with the cool young man, not with me. When I say anything—and now and then I say something—Sophonisba shuts me up with :

“ Oh Edward when he has prospects ! ”

In the natural course of events, Sophonisba will have eighteen more years of life than me. It has never been a very pleasant thought, and it is less than ever pleasant now, when she seems to be looking so far ahead, and making provision for them. Any one would think she was practically engaged to the cool young man for a second husband. I hope he will be good enough to wait another twenty years or so, for I have every intention of living for another twenty or thirty years. If he was different, I might feel different too, but if Sophonisba is blind, I am not, and I see exactly the sort of husband he will make—incredibly selfish and self-sufficient, regarding his wife as something lower than his motor-car, and a very bad second to that object of his affections.

“ Need you be so very far-seeing, Sophonisba ? ” I demanded with slight acidity.

“ You've got to think of the future,” she returned, “ one can't have everythin', Ernest will do very well.”

She already calls him Ernest. "Husbands worth a quarter of a million don't grow on every bush."

I used to find Sophonisba's frankness delightful.

I no longer do so : one can almost be too frank, I think. I stared out of the window without reply.

"What on earth will it matter to you ?" she went on.

I suppose when a man's dead it cannot really matter to him what his wife does, but it matters while he is still alive. "Of course it matters !" I exclaimed angrily.

"Talk about honeymoons turnin' lovers an' nice bridegrooms into regular husbands !" burst out Sophonisba, "I've never seen anyone change so quickly as you, Edward. Husbands aren't in it with you, an' that's flat ! You object to everythin' I do, everybody I make friends with. You are to have your widows an' things, but I must not even try an' get Ernest into the family. Of all the silly prejudices, the one you've taken against that poor boy is the worst. Now I never have prejudices. I don't believe in them."

"What about young Mr. Brown ?" I demanded.

Young Mr. Brown is a pleasant young architect who is considered very clever, and whose artistic house, not very far from Moss End, is considered most charming, though not as yet, let.

"That's not prejudice," she returned at once, "it's disapproval. How can you ask me to approve of a young man who builds ridiculous houses that nobody will ever live in, won't go to church, and doesn't respect the poor pater ?"

"But you—" I began. Sophonisba is not what you would call a regular church-going. She says she would go if she could, but something always crops up on Sunday morning.

"That's different," she returned at once, "I only wish I could manage to get off now an' then. It's different too when it's one's own father, and one has lived in the house with him, but young Mr. Brown hasn't, so he can't know what he really is, and ought to give him the benefit of the doubt, and proper respect, and go to church, and take the risk like a man. No nice-minded person will ever live in that house. It's so artistic that it's hardly respectable, and the very way it's windows sort of leer at you an' peep slyly round corners, is enough to put a decent person off it."

"It's a copy of a certain period," I explained, "though I forget which."

"The Tosh period belongin' to the Bosh age, I should think," she retorted with heat. She always gets heated on the subject of the artistic house. She almost more than hates it. "If it's ever let I know exactly the sort of person who would live in such a freak house, and I shan't call. The less said about the tenant of that house, the better."

"Oh, what house is that?" asked Mrs. Harrip coming up to us. Sophonisba went to meet the cool young man who was in search of her, and I told my kind pretty friend all about the house. She seemed very interested.

Then Sophonisba came back looking very cross, and said she was going in the cool young man's car, and went out banging the door after her. But for the kindness of Mrs. Harrip, who suggested a walk by the sea to cheer me up, I should have been more lonely and miserable than ever that afternoon.

The motorists did not return till close on the dinner-hour, and then the cool young man "took the floor" as usual, and held forth on the only subject that seemed to interest him. To hear him utter the word "pedes-

trian " is an example of what can be done with an apparently simple and inoffensive word. He uses "pedestrian" as one would reluctantly,—and only if obliged,—speak of the lowest form of insect life, not so much in anger, but in utter disgust and loathing that such things are permitted.

He was worse than usual on this occasion, and I grew restive. I cannot ignore him, because already he ignores me. I can only complain rather bitterly afterwards to Sophonisba, and damn his motor-car—for I have got as far as that.

Sophonisba merely changes the subject, "You forget, Kathleen is older than I am, she would have been married before, only she's brains, poor girl!" she returned with that utter inconsequence that I find so difficult to follow, "and I've been married for years,—a lifetime."

"I can only regret you have found the time so long," I returned stiffly, "and trust that your future venture will be more pleasant," with which *I* walked out of the room, and *I* banged the door. There were times when I was glad to think it was other people's doors we were banging, and that it was all included in the charges.

Sophonisba ran after me, but Mrs. Harrip had come up in her tactful way to make things easier, and Sophonisba went away again. When I saw her some hours later she was looking pale and tired, and in my concern I forgot that we are quarrelled. "Aren't you well?" I asked anxiously taking her hand.

She snatched it away, "Don't trouble about me, Edward," she answered coldly, "I am of no consequence in this honeymoon. When you aren't sulkin', you're playin' round with giddy widows, but as long as you're happy, it's not for a mere encumbrance to object. Dash the whole show! Why can't Angus

write ? What's an uncle after all ? I suppose though, I must not expect you to be in any hurry to return. I did think Angus would have managed it sooner."

She did not seem to want me, so I wandered disconsolately into the lounge where I found Mrs. Harrip alone. She looked up from her book as I entered, and I think her kind heart realised that things were very much amiss with me, and that I could hardly endure to have Sophonisba so changed, for in her womanly way she tried to show her sympathy and her understanding.

She touched me lightly on the arm, and looked up into my face, "How sad you look," she cried, "How I wish I could cheer you ! But I am sad too, Mr. Delland, life seems so difficult. One is misunderstood, wasted, thrown away !"

I pressed her hand gratefully, "Wasted, thrown away !" I echoed, grieved to think that such had been her lot, "It is indeed hard ! But there is always courage left——"

I broke off abruptly, for Mrs. Harrip had drawn her hand from mine in a startled fashion, and was looking after Sophonisba who had evidently returned to tell me something, and then changed her mind, for she hurried away, and I could see that she was furious.

I thought it better not to go after her just then. I knew Sophonisba did not care much for Mrs. Harrip, and almost resented my friendship with her. Sophonisba was to be allowed to engage herself to the cool young man in case of eventualities, but I was not to accept the unspoken sympathy of a woman who understood all I was enduring.

"I do not think Mrs. Delland quite likes me," sighed Mrs. Harrip looking hurt, "and I am so ready to be her friend if she would let me."

“ I wish she would,” I answered, for I felt sure that the influence of such a woman might go far with Sophonisba, and perhaps bring her to see she was scarcely being fair to the man who loved her.

I told Sophonisba that Mrs. Harrip wished to be her friend, and that I wished it, but I cannot repeat what Sophonisba said of Mrs. Harrip or where she consigned her. She is so direct, so extremely frank, that she often takes my breath away. She was quite shocking in connection with Mrs. Harrip against whom she had taken a most unreasonable prejudice. She scarcely hated young Mr. Brown and his artistic house as much as she seemed to hate poor harmless gentle Mrs. Harrip.

And so our interminable miserable honeymoon dragged itself on day after day, things getting always a little worse, never a little better, and still there came no word from Angus.

If Angus failed, what was there left ?

“ To have had a beast of a honeymoon for nothin’ ! ” exploded Sophonisba, “ It is too bad ! Still, seein’ we’ve stuck it so long, I suppose we can stick it a little longer. After what we’ve put up with, to make a hash of uncle’s goin’ too would be more than I could stand ! ”

She always spoke of our honeymoon as one speaks of a martyrdom. It did not make it exactly pleasant hearing for me, but then she no longer considered me in any way ; doubtless the cool young man was glad enough to hear of her dissatisfaction. I had myself come suddenly upon them to hear him remark, “ Better luck next time ! ”

“ We may never see Moss End again,” she went on “ or at least never see our own Moss End, for it isn’t ours with uncle there. We shall have to spend the rest of our lives goin’ on honeymoons an’ things, an’ I

could almost wish myself dead!" She got out her handkerchief. "Of course you don't mind, you're gettin' your silly fun out of it all right. Even you will have to spot the cloven hoof in time, but then dessay you could pick up another; there seem lots of that sort in this rotten old world. It's made for them, I suppose. I shouldn't wonder if you've forgotten we own such things as a couple of boys. You sit there calm as anythin', doin' nothin', when all the time they may be gettin' made into curates an' things."

"They are far too young to be in any danger," I exclaimed.

"How do you know? You haven't lived in the house with the poor pater; I have. His father an' grandfather were both clergymen. It's regularly in the family an' hereditary like lots of diseases, an' they may catch it for all you know or care, then we'll have two curates in the house an' have to go to church four times on Sunday, and every second week-day, an' be called miserable sinners an' horrid names an' told what to do and what not to do, by our own children, an' have sermons on the brain——."

She paused for breath, and fumbled for her handkerchief, "The poor pater says the 'tradition' ought to be carried on, Pansy says *all* traditions ought to be carried on, an' when I said that ought to depend upon the tradition, an' that some of them were simply beastly, they both went for me. An' there you sit an' say it doesn't matter, an' them bein' ruined for life! The fact is, as long as there's black eyes an' yellow hair,—which I bet isn't yellow at the roots,—men don't care who are ruined, an' as for all those fashionable coils she wears—well they're easy enough to buy."

"If you mean Mrs. Harrip," I said stiffly, "you are quite wrong, Sophonisba. She is a nice woman, and

a nice woman does not do that sort of thing. She wears her own hair——”

“Or none! Does she? Not when it’s none, unless she’s a fool—and there’s no green in her eye. I happen to know one has only to go into a shop, and there you are!”

“You must be mistaken, dear,” I insisted gravely, “I could not like or admire a woman that would do that, and——”

Sophonisba went furiously red, and bounced up and down on her chair, “Very well I am mistaken then. Your Mrs. Harrip no more buys her fashionable coils than I did!”

I was glad that she should be so quick to own herself in the wrong.

“I did think Angus would have managed it by this,” she went on, “even knowin’ what uncle is! His bag is nothin’ to the trouble he has brought into my life. Even the telescopin’ admiral hardly counts. Let him telescope! As for that silly political Mr. Pottle I don’t know that I shouldn’t be quite glad to see his silly face again, an’ his new wife an’ baby. Oh, Edward how excitin’ it must be to be married to three different ones, an’ to keep havin’ different new babies! Though his are only girls, but then it’s excitin’ always hopin’ the next won’t be!”

So Sophonisba already saw beyond the cool young man. Perhaps Pottle himself, with his extraordinary fatality in wives, was in her mind.

I said,—perhaps with temper,—that it was not everybody who could hope for Pottle’s good fortune, and added that there were doubtless many who envied it. I could not have believed I should live to say such a thing, even in a passion, and above all to Sophonisba.

She got up and flounced away,—I cannot describe

her departure in other terms,—“ Anyway I’m eighteen years to the good—so there ! ” she announced defiantly, “ an’ I mean to hang on to them for all I’m worth ! ”

Oh she didn’t trouble to mince matters—Sophonisba !

The very next day the longed-for letter came, and I drew a breath of relief. Angus had got rid of Sophonisba’s uncle, now all that remained for me to do was to get rid of Sophonisba’s cool young man, and I had every intention of doing it. We would leave for Hill Land at once, and behind us, we would leave the man of motors—Master Bung the Brewer.

Though Angus’ letter put our minds at rest, it was very short, and very reticent as to details.

“ *Dere Sir and Honoured Master* ” (it began)

“ *That there uncle is gone, D.V. Yours Respectably, A. Macdonald.* ”

“ Gone how and when and where ? ” wondered Sophonisba. I could only wonder too. I could not offer any solution. “ It is Angus’ genius,” I said, “ and after all genius is without a solution. We will go home at once.” I spoke the more firmly as I expected objections, and meant to ignore them.

Sophonisba opened her eyes very wide, “ I did not expect you to be in such a hurry. Won’t you be sorry to leave—the Esplanade Hotel ? ”

“ I never wish to see it again ! ” I declared, “ but won’t you be sorry to leave the—the cool—— sea-waves ? ”

“ Never wish to see them again either,” she returned, “ nasty sea-sick things, enjoyin’ your misery ! ” We had had a rather unsuccessful sea-trip which we had somehow never repeated. Sophonisba did not like the waves, and I disliked the language used by the men on the bridge who never troubled to remember that ladies were present when things happened that he did

not wish to happen. Something had run into us, or we had run into something, I forget which, and Sophonisba could not remember either, anyway we had both showed complete and stoical indifference to danger or to death.

“Then let us pack,” I suggested, and we packed, hurriedly and anyhow.

Sophonisba looked at her watch, “You have three minutes to say good-bye to the artistic widow,” she said, “I would not make it any longer if I were you ; one never knows. I suppose we shall never see her again on this side of the grave, and personally life doesn’t seem long enough to worry about the other, and who we shall meet,—and who we shall miss, that’s what matters most !” She burst out laughing because my bag wouldn’t shut whatever I did with it.

“Wait a jiff,” she cried gaily. “I’ll just sit on it with all my weight !” She sat on it with all her weight, and it shut without further protest there and then.

“Do you know what life makes me think of ?” she asked suddenly.

“No, what ?” I asked. This was the real Sophonisba again. I forgot all that had come between us, and had the grace to be ashamed of my own ill-temper and objectionable conduct, “A maze ?” To me it sometimes seems rather a bewildering affair. The marriage service, if I remember correctly, bids one ‘not be afraid with any amazement,’ or words to that effect, I had not been afraid, but I must own I had continually been amazed since the happy day on which I entered the married state. I suppose I was a little old to hope ever to understand the divine complexity of a woman, and Sophonisba,—like the really great,—is so complex as to be almost a complete enigma.

“A bit of a maze perhaps,” she now answered me, “but I didn’t mean that exactly. Sometimes, Edward, life just seems to sum itself up in this: always tryin’ to get away from somebody, relations, an’ other peoples friends, an’ just not succeedin’ when you think you have! But I’ve succeeded this time, I think.”

“So have I,” I exclaimed thankfully, thinking of the cool young man, “so that’s all right, isn’t it, Sophonisba?”

“You bet it is! Where are my brown boots? Oh they won’t go in! They’ll have to go in your bag, dear. I’ll sit on it again.”

In all she sat on it again seven times owing to things she could not get into her own boxes, and it was a very gorged bag I saw joyfully on a taxi. But Sophonisba’s boxes were gorged too, and nothing seemed to matter. Even the cool young man’s presence at the station did not trouble me very much, and Sophonisba’s “Now mind you don’t forget,” fell on indifferent ears as far as I was concerned. I knew the cool young men of this world forget easily and often, and meant to see to it that Sophonisba forgot too.

“Thank God that’s over!” she breathed thankfully as we steamed out of the station, “Never dare ask me to come on another honeymoon, Edward!” and I promised I never would.

CHAPTER XVII

ANGUS IS RETICENT

“**I** DO wonder how he managed it—Angus, I mean,” I murmured as we were borne homewards.

“Seein’ as he’ managed it, I think we may leave the ‘how,’” returned Sophonisba beaming at me, “Askin’ no questions is temptin’ nobody to tell lies.”

All our misunderstandings and annoyances seemed to vanish as if they had never been, the nearer we got to Hill Land.

“Paradise Regained,” I whispered, and determined it would not be my fault if it were ever Paradise Lost again. I would be myself the angel with the flaming sword that would bar out for ever cool young men and superfluous uncles. That I was not exactly the shape for an angel did not trouble me. I was too happy and light-hearted to mind being ridiculous in my thoughts. And I was going to guard my Eden.

“Here we are! Hurrah!” I cried gladly as we steamed into Hill Land station, conscious that it was a very different sort of “hurrah” with which I had started on my honeymoon.

“At last!” breathed Sophonisba, her head out of the window, “Where are the angel-boys?”

I pointed them out, and added rather anxiously,

“ Why is that furious-looking man shaking his fist at them ? ”

“ Because they’ve been doin’ things they shouldn’t—the creatures now ! ” exclaimed Sophonisba joyfully, “ The poor pater hasn’t harmed them after all, they’re just the same unspoiled darlin’s. Nobody could take them for horrid little curates ! ”

Seeing, that at this very moment, they were putting their thumbs to their noses at the insulted and angry-looking man, there was certainly little resemblance.

Sophonisba’s head went farther out.

“ Oh there’s Satan—dear little fellow ! ” she screamed delighted, “ Goodness he’s off to London ! Stop him somebody—guard !—porter !—he’s not to go ! Oh, Edward, he’s come back. Goodness, if he isn’t hangin’ on to somethin’, what is it ? ”

I looked out, and hastily subsided on to the far seat. After all there was no use my interfering. He did not like it.

“ He’s hanging on to the leg of the young man who isn’t ‘ quite,’ Sophonisba,” I said unhappily.

“ It sounds just like a French exercise,” she returned, “ But it’s better than goin’ to London—dear little fellow ! ”

“ I suppose so, but I do wish he wouldn’t.”

“ It’s only the second time, an’ it’s as a warnin’ an’ duty. The first time to show us uncle was a fraud, an’ now to show people the young man who isn’t quite, *isn’t* quite.”

“ But people know already,” I faltered.

“ Everybody can’t know. There must be somebody in ignorance or Satan wouldn’t have done it,” retorted Sophonisba hotly, her face very pink, “ Do be logical, Edward ! ”

We waited till the young man, had, with great diffi-

culty, been detached from Satan and at once taken in a cab to the doctor's, before alighting. Then the station-master came and practically made us get out, and Satan rushed up wagging himself with dangerous violence. The station-master said did we know our dog had bitten Mr. Linter, and Sophonisba hurriedly said we didn't, and that it was the last thing he would do, and an entire mistake anyway, and please not to mention it. Then the boys fell on us, and began talking both at once.

"We had j-j-jam for t-t-tea every night," announced Edward the Second with triumph, "We w-w-wouldn't s-s-speak or say our p-p-prayers till they l-l-let us h-h-have it, an' so they l-l-let us h-h-have it!" He beamed at us proudly, Sophonisba as proudly back. After all they had had a house-full of grown-ups against them, and they had won.

"Still the poor pater oughtn't to have encouraged him to stammer like that," Sophonisba whispered to me with some indignation.

"An' we s-s-saved up the stones an' f-f-frew them at g-g-grandpa when he w-w-wasn't lookin'," and Edward the Second beamed more than all of us put together. Satan wagged in chorus.

"Oh you shouldn't have done that!" I exclaimed aghast.

"Then what could we do with the stones what we had saved?" demanded Billium with his soft little drawl, his eyes very wide, "An' it were only poor gran'pa."

"An' when he w-w-wasn't l-l-lookin'" further explained Edward the Second virtuously.

"It wasn't at all a nice sort of thing to do," I began dismayed, but Sophonisba whispered, "Don't be silly, Edward! Why fuss about a thing like that, an' after they had thought it out themselves!"

"But grand'pa dodged," amended Billium sorrowfully.

"Fancy the poor pater learnin' to dodge at his age!" exclaimed Sophonisba, and told the boys they must not do it again, "You see it isn't hospitable," she said hurriedly, getting a little mixed, I think.

Then Mr. Kearness himself bore down upon us, and warmly welcomed our return. He seemed delighted to have us back. He said the boys had behaved perfectly all the time, and that they would miss them at the vicarage more than he could say, they had kept everybody so alive, as it were. He had sent their boxes up to Moss End that morning, as he felt sure we should want to take them straight up home with us.

"I have heard Percy has left," he said turning to me, "but Angus gave me no particulars. He just said he had gone, and somehow I thought it better not to pursue the subject. I am indeed thankful the place is rid of him at last without further scandal."

And I was more than thankful too, though also curious how it had come about, seeing how very tenacious Sophonisba's uncle had proved himself to be.

The boys went to see how their pets were getting on, Sophonisba sought Dorothea, and I went in search of Angus.

He greeted me heartily, and proved unusually loquacious, but of Percy Kearness he said never a word, and indeed made it as difficult as possible for me to introduce the subject. One might have supposed that no such person as Sophonisba's uncle had ever existed. Whenever I approached the subject he switched me away with a dexterity and determination that made my task more and more difficult. I almost began to doubt myself that there had ever been such a person as our unbidden guest. There was a close, dogged look

round mouth and eyes that told me that any information I sought would have to be extracted as one extracts a tooth, and I have never fancied I could make a success as a dentist. However I was quite determined to know everything there was to be known about the departure of Percy Kearness.

“So we have lost our visitor?” I began cautiously.

Angus fell to hoeing with great vigour, “Ay, sir. We want a new load of manure right down bad, sir.”

“Did he leave any message?”

Angus looked up with his blankest expression, “Who sir? Simpson has a fine load of manure.”

“What day did Mr. Kearness go?”

“I suppose it would be the day I wrote, sir. The squire’s got a new gardener,—a green ’un. We might work some stuff off on him.”

“Never mind Mr. Pollyt’s gardener. I wish to know about Mr. Kearness. Did he—er—go willingly?” I knew he could hardly have done that; only discomfort could have driven him to depart. I imagined the meals must have got very bad indeed, and perhaps his bedroom had had to be spring-cleaned when he wanted to be in it.

“He didn’t make no objection, sir,” returned Angus blandly, “I heard a mighty funny story when you were away, sir; it were like this——”

But though Angus stories are very funny indeed, and never in the least coarse or objectionable, this one must keep. The matter of Percy Kearness came first.

“When did he make up his mind to go?” I demanded.

Angus scratched his head and stared at the hoe.

“He did make up his mind to go of course?”

“Seems like it, sir, don’t it? He’s gone, sir.”

“ I know he’s gone, Angus, but I don’t know where, and how, and why, he went. Answer my question, Angus ! ”

“ That’s three questions, sir, an’ I had promised myself to get this here bit hoed by supper, sir.” He fell to hoeing with such force that I stepped some distance back, and perhaps it was just as well, for the head of the hoe came off and flew in my direction. He picked it up, jammed it on, and went on hoeing, though with a trifle less ferocity.

I saw I had my work cut out. It was a battle of wills between myself and the man who gardened. He had won on all previous occasions, but I did not mean to let him win on this. I would keep my temper, and drag the thing out of him bit by bit with judicious questionings. I have always fancied myself as a ruthless barrister cross-examining a reluctant witness. Angus was the reluctant witness. I took a deep breath and began :

“ Where did he take his ticket to ? ”

“ I didn’t hear of him taking no ticket, sir. The squire is after that load of manure somethink crool.”

“ Then he didn’t go by train ? ” I was startled. Perhaps he had not got very far after all.

“ Sir, he went, D.V.—or not. Simpson said as how I could have first refusal of that manure, sir, at the price I offered.”

“ You mean he drove to the Junction ? Then he would probably go to London ? ”

“ I didn’t overdo the price, sir, it’ll be no such a bad bargain.”

“ Did Mr. Kearness drive ? ”

“ Ay sir. That green gardener of squire’s he——”

“ He drove to the Junction ? Mr. Kearness I mean ? ”

"I didn't ask his destination, sir, I hadn't the presumption."

I was getting tired, but still I struggled on. After all I had learned something. He had gone away in a vehicle.

"He took his bag?" I asked quickly.

"Ay, I put it in along of him. Cleared out bag an' baggage he is. Happen along of that there kiss-me. Can I order the manure, sir?"

"Damn the manure!" I exploded, "I didn't come to talk about manure, I came to talk about Mr. Kearness."

"He's gone, sir. It was Fate."

I staggered and turned pale, "Good God do you mean he's dead, man?" I managed to get out.

Angus spat into a flower-bed, "Dunno sir," he returned indifferently.

"You must know, you've got to know!" After all he was Sophonisba's uncle, and our guest. "You should have sent for us the moment he was taken ill."

"I didn't know he was going to be took ill, sir, lessways not that sudden, sir. It didn't leave no time for sending. The squire's gardener, you never saw anything so green, he——"

"What was wrong with Mr. Kearness?" I feared delirium tremens, horrible as it is to own it.

Angus seemed equally reluctant to state the nature of his illness, "It is what I suppose?" I asked.

"Maybe, sir, maybe. T'anyrate he's gone, sir."

"He didn't—he wasn't ill up there then?" I pointed to the house.

"No, sir."

"Do you mean he was taken ill outside?"

"Ay."

"In the road?"

“Not exactly the road so to speak.”

I was glad it had not been as public as all that,
“The garden?” I asked.

“Ay. The squire’s gardener——”

“What did you do, Angus?”

He looked at me suspiciously, and scratched his head,
“I went on with me work,” he said at length, “It was what I’m paid for, that an’ followin’ out wishes. The manure——”

“You left him lying ill and helpless? You did nothing? Then where is he now?”

“Dunno, sir,” returned Angus so truthfully that I knew he was lying, and meant to go on lying if I would let him. I was more than ever determined to have the truth and nothing but the truth. I was only just warming up to my work, and the more reluctant the witness got, the more “keen” I became.

“You were working in the garden when it happened?”

“Ay.”

“What were you working at?”

Angus seemed more than ever unwilling to answer,
“I was just thinking,” he said at length.

“That was with your brain,” I said cunningly,
“What were you doing with your hands?”

“Hoeing,” he returned sullenly. “Beg pardon, sir, but I’ve got to call round at Simpsons——” he made to pass me.

“Stay where you are,” I commanded, “I have a few questions to ask you Angus.”

“You’ve asked me amany, sir, an’ I’ve answered them all. Squire he’s after that there manure——”

“Stay where you are! Then you were hoeing? Where? Here?”

“Ay, herabouts.”

“ And Mr. Kearness came out of the house ? ”

“ Maybe.”

“ In—er—what condition was he in ? I mean did he seem quite well ? ”

“ He didn’t say aught of their being anythink the matter.”

“ Then you thought he was just as usual, Angus ? ”

“ I was thinking of me work, not of extraneous manners, sir.”

“ Did he come up to you ? ” There is no doubt I should have succeeded as a cross-examiner. It was rather interesting work too once you had warmed up to it.

“ I can’t say. I weren’t noticing.”

“ Did he speak to you ? ”

“ I was hoeing.”

“ How close was he ? As close as I am ? ”

“ Maybe ; maybe not ? ”

“ Then he was fairly close ? You could hear what he said ? What did he say ? ”

“ Naught.”

“ What did you say ? ”

“ The same, sir.”

“ Then you just looked at each other.”

“ I was occupied with me work, sir, I hadn’t no time or no mind for gapin’ about.”

“ You saw him all the same, and he seemed as usual ? Then he became suddenly ill ? ”

“ Ay.”

“ Was it a fit, Angus ? ” Percy Kearness is very short, extremely fat, and thick-necked. It was not unlikely that he should have a fit.

Angus seized on the word with almost suspicious alacrity, “ Ay. A fit. Strook down sudden-like.”

“ And who struck him, Angus ? ” I asked with deadly calm.

Certainly I had missed my vocation !

Angus gave a jump which betrayed him, " Maybe lightning," he said feebly, " We've been having fair awful storms since you went, sir. The visitation of God—that were it, sir." He heaved a great sigh of relief, and went on hoeing.

I pointed to the implement, " Was he visited with that ? " I asked grimly.

" He put hisself fair underneath it." He spoke in his most determined tones.

" Nonsense ! " I exclaimed, " He would never do that, and you know it ! " He had never gone near Angus alone if he could help it ; would it be likely he would put himself under that ferocious hoe ? I knew he wouldn't. Angus had made for him with the tool, and Percy Kearness had fled. I did not regret it ; but I had no intention of being deceived about the matter with a story of an illness that had never happened.

" It were an accident," persisted Angus, " an' all due to his carelessness, sir."

" You don't mean you really hit him with it ! " I gasped thunderstruck, " You would not dare to do such a thing, Angus ! " I was thoroughly alarmed by now.

" He come an' put hisself beneath it when I were busy at me work, an' no time to take notice. He asked for it, sir."

" Tell me at once what happened ! " I commanded, wiping my damp face.

" I was biffing at these here weeds," he gave me a graphic illustration, " He stopped to pick up his cigar—your cigar at least—an' when I continooed to biff them weeds—I found I had biffed that there uncle."

" Good heavens ! " was all I found to say.

“Ay, it was fair upsetting.” He did not sound upset.

“Wasn’t he furious?”

“He didn’t mention it, sir.”

“You don’t mean——?”

Angus went on hoeing.

“You killed him?” I managed to get out. But in that case would Angus be still at large? Or had he said nothing, and just buried the body somewhere about? In that case—in a very awful sense of the word—Sophonisba’s uncle would be always with us. And what must I do? Must I give Angus—my faithful servant and friend, and the best gardener in the neighbourhood—up to justice, or forever hold my peace? As far as that went, I was a J.P. myself. I had got myself appointed so as to be able to get people off as much as possible. Offenders said it was quite a pleasure to be tried by me, unless they were of the cruel or wife-beating persuasion, when my sentences made everybody gasp.

Since charity begins at home, it would be almost my duty to get Angus off, for neither Dorothea nor the garden could get on without him.

Angus seemed to read my thoughts, “Least said soonest mended,” he observed cheerfully, “there’s few troubles that a shut mouth won’t get you out of. Come to that, if everybody kept a shut mouth there wouldn’t be no troubles. The young turnips——”

“Hush,” I said sternly, “this is no time to talk of turnips. How can you bear to have the—the possible death of a human being on your soul?”

Angus took up the hoe, “If you’re sooperstitious, sir, maybe we could get it off on that new green gardener——”

“I meant——”

"At nigh furst hand price, sir, I shouldn't wonder. I might shine it up a bit, then it's good as new, an' none tellin' the difference. Him won't ever use elber grease enough to bring off the head."

"He went down as if dead? That much I understand. What happened then? You did not leave him lying there surely?"

"They called for him, sir."

"Who?"

"The amboolance."

"Oh! You had the decency to send for that. Then he's in the hospital the other side of Hill Town?"

"Ay, I suppose so."

"He is alive, getting better?"

"Dunno, sir. He's gone from here."

"You haven't even enquired as to his condition?" I exclaimed indignantly.

"I've been that busy with planting-out."

"You have got us both into terrible trouble, and him too, poor fellow. Oh, Angus, why——"

"I dunno why. I just done it. Maybe it were meant. The spring onions——"

"He can charge you for assault. It will make an awful scandal."

"He won't charge me for nothin', that's all right, sir. It comes handy-like, having a boss on the bench so to speak. But he'll keep his mouth shut, will that there uncle, and just hook it when he gets better—if he do get better. About the manure, sir——"

"He's bound to say something—" I began.

"'Ospital folk gets accustomed to language," returned Angus unperturbed, "they've had dockers an' coal-heavers, and even that there uncle's won't astonished them that much. I wouldn't let that worry

you, sir." Apparently it never occurred to Angus to worry on his own account. The cool young man himself could hardly have taken it more coolly.

"It seems impossible to bring you to a sense of your responsibility!" I exclaimed angrily.

"There ain't no responsibility when you become a fatalist, sir. Everythink is just fate an' can't be helped nohow. It's rare an' comforting, sir."

"I hope it will comfort you when you find yourself in the dock charged with attempted murder or manslaughter," I retorted.

"I don't fancy as I'll find myself in the dock, sir."

"Why not?" Was he counting on me?

"Because I don't fancy the dock, sir, and I don't fancy that there uncle will be feeling like talking much."

"He will not always remain unconscious, you fool!" I do not deny that I was getting in a regular fuss about the matter.

"Maybe, sir, maybe not. There's delirium. 'Ospital folk get accustomed to delirium, and tremens too, and don't take no notice."

"They aren't fools!" I said irately, "They will ask questions, and see that they have their answers too."

"Ay. I saw to that, sir. I give 'em the answers afore they axed the questions. I said as how that there uncle had falled from a tree, an falled with his head on a wopse-trap, leastway bottles, sir."

"What in God's name would he be doing in a tree!" I burst out, "Did you tell them that?"

"Ay, sir."

"What did you tell them?"

"Wopses traps, sir."

"The bottles?"

"Ay, sir. Said as he was getting ready for the

summer, putting up fresh ones. There's a many empty to go up, sir."

"They believed it?"

"I showed 'em the tree and the bottles, sir. 'Course they believed it."

"They won't believe it long," I said gloomily.

But Angus had made up his mind that they should, "They'll believe what they are meant to believe, sir."

"Did Nurse Macdonald come with the ambulance?"

I enquired. Nurse Macdonald is from a large London hospital, a very efficient lady of some twenty odd years, with a pretty face and very determined mouth. She is not altogether popular because her aristocratic hauteur offends many, but then I suppose a girl who has been accustomed to her father's ancestral acres, and then finds herself left with nothing but her ancient lineage as an asset and livelihood, may a little resent a position she shows rather plainly she considers beneath her.

"Ay," said Angus grimly, "it was her I fetched."

"She will talk," I said unhappily. She had that reputation, I knew.

"Maybe, sir, it's a way wimmin has, but not about that there uncle, she won't. If she messes that bit of business it'll be me that does the talking, sir, and her match with the doctor won't come off."

"How can you possibly prevent her talking, or her marriage, Angus?"

"By telling on her. Telling as she ain't no lady, but own cousin to a gardener, and daughter of a working man. She was always a smart fancy piece, fair eat up with high notions, and if she does her work proper and keeps that there uncle quiet, well I'll keep my mouth shut."

"You can't mean it!" I gasped. It seemed in-

credible that that fine lady and Angus could be cousins ; why he touched his cap to her and called her mum, and she treated him as if he was something quite beneath her notice.

“ I means it, and she knows I means it. Live and let live is my motter. Let her rise herself, let her catch the doctor, I won’t give her away unless she gives me away first. She’s all of thirty-five, and it’s took some doing—getting married genteel. She’s sisters in service, and one married to a coachman, and an aunt—no relation to me—in the Workhouse. My repootation can stand talking better’n her’n. If that there uncle wants witnesses, well, I shouldn’t wonder if she’d seed him fall out of that there tree, and fall on one of the bottles too and cut his head open.”

“ It’s all very shocking, very shocking indeed, Angus ! ” I found myself saying.

“ Ay, sir, things what happen Providential often are to people what they happen to. Then I can order the manure, sir ? ”

I said he could order anything he liked, and sought Sophonisba, and told her what Angus had told me. I was rather horrified when she said—for after all Percy Kearness is her uncle—“ Angus seems to have managed very well. How much did you give him ? ”

“ Oh, Sophonisba ! ” I gasped.

“ I could get nothing out of Dorothea. She just said she never meddled in Angus’ business, and he had seen to Mr. Kearness going.”

“ I must go to the hospital and see how he is,” I went on, “ he may be seriously hurt, dear ? ”

“ When people climb trees at that age, and fall out of them on to bottles, people have only themselves to blame if they get their head hurt,” said Sophonisba impatiently, somewhat to my surprise since she had

implied ignorance on the matter, "and I expect they told him so at the hospital. It's odd the pater knowin' nothin', but perhaps uncle Percy would not let him know for fear of bein' church-visited an' all that. Well I must say it's a bit of a relief to me, and I don't see why we shouldn't be perfectly happy now. He will never come here again, that's certain, unless of course you were fool enough to ask him and promise to save him from Angus."

"I don't think that's very likely!" I exclaimed.

"The garden's lookin' lovely, such a crop of gooseberries as we shall have!"

"I must go to the hospital at once. I must see what can be done; how he is."

Sophonisba gave my arm an absent pat, "Darlin', why fuss so? Let's have a picnic in the woods, just ourselves and the boys? It will be like the dear old times again."

But I shook my head, "I really must go to the hospital," I sighed regretfully.

And I went.

I asked for Nurse Macdonald, and was shown into a room, where she came after a longish time. She bowed, and graciously commanded me to sit down. It seemed odd to think that this lady, with the air of a queen receiving the meanest of her subjects, was cousin to my man who gardened, and yet now I knew of the relationship, I could see the likeness. It might be more a likeness of character than mere feature, the likeness of that quality called doggedness. It lurked round her determined mouth and eyes, as it lurked round the eyes and mouth of Angus. They both went through the world seeking to get the best of a bargain, and oftener than not, they got it. I wondered if Nurse Macdonald would find the doctor altogether the bar-

gain she supposed, but that was none of my business. I had come to enquire about Sophonisba's uncle, and though I did not much fancy the task or its difficulties, I had to get through it.

I came to the point at once by asking how he was.

"He is doing very well," said Nurse Macdonald, looking over my head. She is tall as well as haughty.

I said I did not doubt it ; that I knew him to be in excellent hands.

She bowed.

Then I thought of something else to say, but it wasn't really what I wanted to know.

"He is conscious ? " I asked boldly at length.

"He has been conscious almost from the first. His injuries were not serious, not as serious as one would expect from a man of his age and weight falling out of a tree." She looked right into my eyes, her own very expressionless and hard.

My eyes fell.

"Your gardener told me all about it—a most respectable and dependable man. You are lucky."

I made some confused answer.

"If my poor father had been so lucky on his place in Scotland, our old home might have been our own yet, and not in the hands of upstarts—manufacturers and that sort of thing." Her lip curled.

"Dreadful ! " I got out with a gasp.

She gave a little laugh, shrugged graceful shoulders, "Oh they look down on me now, you know ! "

"Surely not ! " I managed to say. Possibly rich manufacturers did look down on the daughters of working men, hardly treated them as equals.

"I have come down to this, Mr. Delland, but never mind, there is no disgrace in honest work, I am not ashamed of it."

“Why should you be?” I asked.

She looked at me sharply. “Do you wish to see my patient? You will not excite him?”

I did not wish to see him and I certainly did not want to excite him. It was my wish never to see him again, but I did not know what was right. “Has he asked for me?” I temporised.

“I could not be certain. He has been delirious. You must not take notice of anything he says, both the doctor and I are agreed he does not know himself what he is saying. The brain may be—merely temporarily of course—affected.”

“I think I had better see him,” I faltered. After all I must know that he had all he wanted and was thoroughly comfortable, and I rather wanted to know if he guessed how his accident had happened, and if he had any plans for his next movements. His nurse gave me to understand he would soon be as strong as ever.

“He has a ward by himself. Your gardener thought you would prefer that?”

“Of course.”

“He is not out of bed yet, but he’s allowed to sit up. I am sure you will be very pleased with his progress.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ATTITUDE OF SOPHONISBA'S UNCLE IS CONSOLING

ANGUS' superior cousin ushered me into Percy's private ward, and then departed, and I must say it was with some nervous apprehension that I found myself alone with the invalid. In fact I have no doubt that shrinking and apologetic guilt was written all over my face ; at the same time there was also written—at least I hoped he would read it thus—an absolute determination not to take back our unbidden guest on any consideration whatsoever.

He was sitting up, and waved a fat hand at me as if nothing had happened, and as if we had parted yesterday and met under the ordinary conditions.

“Hullo old son,” he cried gaily, “so you're back. Honeymoon bust up sooner than expected, eh ? Well I don't wonder. Jolly sporting to stick it as long as you did ! Pretty rotten, wasn't it ? ”

“Awful,” I exclaimed feelingly, very thankful to talk upon any but the one subject.

He winked. “Next time leave Sophonisba behind ? ”

“Oh I should hardly care to go on a honeymoon alone,” I returned with a laugh.

“Who advised that ? ” he asked in his driest tone, “As a man of some experience, let me remind you

that variety is the salt of life. So you're back at the dear old place, and poor old Percy is laid by the heels ! ” He sought my eye.

I avoided it.

“ You heard about my accident ? ”

“ I may have done,” I stammered helplessly, “ something about it, I mean.”

“ It is all a great confusion,” returned Percy passing his hand over his forehead, “ I am hardly sure myself exactly what happened. Sometimes I think I fell out of a tree and cut my head on a wasp-trap. Sometimes I think I didn't.”

“ Really,” I said rather hurriedly.

Again he sought my eye ; again I avoided it.

“ Odd the ambulance should happen to be passing,” he observed inconsequently.

“ Oh was it ? ” I said. I wondered how soon I might with decency take my departure. One had to consider whether visits were good for invalids or not. It would not do to excite Percy Kearness.

“ It just was,” he retorted closing his eyes, “ it happened along at the what-d'er-call-it-moment ? Something happened to me ; it happened, there your are ! Quite providential, eh ? ”

“ Oh quite,” I agreed. My face was getting very damp. Did he know nothing and surmise all ; or did he neither know or surmise ?

“ Angus being Scotch may account for it,” he went on, and opened his eyes suddenly.

“ He is only a little Scotch,” I remarked in some haste.

“ Enough for second-sight though. What but second-sight would see to it that the ambulance should start before anything had happened ? Uncanny folk the Scotch. I believe I shall fight rather shy of Angus

in future. The undertaker might get started next time."

I tried to wipe my face without him noticing. "This hot weather is very trying," I observed conversationally.

"A bit chilly to-day, isn't it?"

"Is it?" I asked feebly.

"Still it's good to be alive; there's always that."

"Oh yes," I agreed.

"You must have been delighted with the look of Moss End garden on your return, weeds, slugs, obstacles, all removed. I suppose you raised his wages?"

"I forget," I lied.

"Such a worker. I assure you even to watch him hoeing was a lesson. It positively paralysed me."

"He is never idle."

"What the hands find to do, he does with all his might! Quite so, and what muscles, Edward. That hoe now——"

"We are going to sell it," I said hastily.

"Why?"

"The head comes off," I confessed abjectly, "and the squire has got a new gardener—a green one. Angus would die rather than neglect such an opportunity."

"Angus does without opportunities; he makes them," said Percy blandly, "So you will be without a hoe?"

"Oh no," I cried, "you see Angus will get a new one for the price of the old. That's the sort of man he is."

"One with a head that doesn't come off. Not a bad idea. Heads flying about like that might be dangerous. Suppose a poor chap happening along got it in the neck, eh?"

"Angus says the new gardener will never hoe hard enough for that."

"Then he isn't so green after all. Personally I have always thought that Angus rather overdid it."

"He likes work," I returned.

"Likes his work, and his wife, and his master! An eccentric beggar. I am sorry I shall not see him again."

"You are going away?"

"Ah my dear fellow don't blame me for leaving you like this, I assure you circumstances over which I have no control, are alone responsible. When I am well I must go. I don't know where, and I don't know how—or care. After all the life of a tramp begging bread from door to door may be pleasant enough for all I know—or I might sell boot-laces. When a man loses his fortune; the world—like his relations—has no longer any use for him. I shall try and keep about the neighbourhood as much as possible; you are a charitable lot here, I am told."

"Tut, tut, it won't come to that," I said uneasily, "we must have a proper talk over things. Canada now——"

"So damn cold," he complained with a shiver.

"Africa?"

"So damn hot. No, no, dear old England is good enough for me, and dear old Hill Land too! Poor old William shall get me parish relief, then we'll be all happy together, eh."

"Oh we will soon find something more congenial than that," I said firmly, "but you are not fit to move yet. How do you like Nurse Macdonald?"

"So damn respectable," he complained peevishly, "Got her eye on the doctor too. Poor devil, perhaps he'll get it in the neck too. Odd, but she reminds me of the hard-working Angus. I suppose he and the

Queen of Sheba as I call her, ain't related by any chance ? ”

I coloured, “ One never knows,” I said cautiously.

He bounced up in bed, and something like panic flashed into his eyes, “ Help me to dress,” he implored, “ I'm off at once. This is more than a bit thick ! Talk of falling among thieves O-Oh ! ” He gave a slight groan and sank back helplessly on his pillows. He was obviously still weak and ill.

“ You shall go as soon as you're fit,” I said soothingly.

“ If I ever am fit,” he returned, “ Is she working under Angus, or is Angus working under her, and where do you come in, and why hasn't Sophonisba come to see her poor old uncle, and bring him some home comforts ? ”

I knew what he meant by “ home comforts,” and shook my head, “ Not after a wound,” I said, “ it heats the blood, and may do serious injury.”

“ But if I am ready to risk that, that is my business isn't it ? ” he demanded, “ Oh why did I go near—why did I try to hang up those wasp-traps ? ”

I looked out of the window, “ Fate, my dear fellow,” I said.

“ Then I'm between the devil and the deep sea, Fate on one side of me, the Queen of Sheba on the other, and both acting together, it seems. Well I don't mind telling you, that unless you can absolutely guarantee that fate will treat me differently in future, you'll never find me within your garden gate again.”

“ One cannot go against fate,” I said sadly, “ What is written, is written.”

“ In other words the furrow is hoed and so on, and may be hoed again. Well kismet—and so long.” He lay down and drew the sheet up to his chin, his eyes narrow and thoughtful.

I slipped thankfully from the room. His attitude, had, on the whole, been consoling. He had made no accusation ; he had been ready enough to blame fate, and bow his head to its blow. He spoke quite naturally of his attempt to climb the tree, merely regretting it.

I started to tell Sophonisba all about it but she paid no attention, " He's gone, that's all that matters," she said, " Why fuss, Edward ? "

CHAPTER XIX

A YET MORE UNWELCOME GUEST

A FEW days later I had a most frightful shock. I met the cool young man face to face in the drive as I was returning from the village. He had his hands in his pockets and was strolling carelessly about as if he owned the place.

If it is not quite correct to say you could have knocked me down with a feather, you certainly could have almost knocked me down.

I gasped and rubbed my eyes and stared.

"The devil!" I gasped.

He clapped me on the back, "Hullo, old son! An' how are you? Your conscience must be a bit rocky to take me for the devil at this time of the day. Glad to see you." And he held out his hand with a cool condescending graciousness that almost drove me mad.

I ignored it, my blood boiling. So it had come to this. He actually welcomed me to my own house and garden! Indeed it no longer seemed like my own house and garden. I was conscious of merely being there on sufferance.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Stayin'," he returned laconically, and added in his cool condescending fashion, "quite a decent little crib you have here. Good motor roads too, and not so much of the pedestrian pest. She's in the coach-

house, snug as they make 'em. I had to shy out the old Noah's Ark I found there, but Mrs. Delland said your man could find some place to shove it in. She don't like crowdin', you see."

To hear him talk of Sophonisba, and her likes and dislikes in this possessive fashion, was almost more than I could stand. I stood there choking with incoherent wrath. And to think I had minded having Sophonisba's uncle !

"Got a tickle in your throat, eh ? Cough it up, old man, cough it up."

The blood rushed into my head.

He looked at me with some alarm, "I say, as bad as all that. Don't go and choke for goodness sake ! It would put me in no end of a fix. Shall I hit you on the back ? " He advanced with his hand ready.

I dodged him, "No, go away," I managed to get out.

He started at my tone, and stared.

"What are you doing here," I asked rudely, "who asked you ? "

"Mrs. Delland."

"Well I happen to be the master of this house."

His mouth opened wide, "I say, you don't mean it. Are you really ? I thought she ran the whole show. Oh of course I'll hook it if you ain't struck on a visitor just now, but she told me you would be delighted. Awf'ly sorry," and he strolled away.

I found Sophonisba and went straight to the point, "What is the cool young man doing here ? " I demanded.

"Payin' us a visit, Edward. Didn't he tell you ? "

"I never asked him," I retorted.

"No, but I did, and he accepted. I reminded him at the station when we left. You must have heard me yourself."

“ You asked him without my knowledge and—er—permission.”

“ Permission ! ” she stared as if she could not believe the evidence of her own ears, “ Whatever are you talkin’ about, Edward. What sort of funny new idea have you got into your head ? ”

“ You asked him without my permission because you knew he would never be asked with it ? ” I accused her bitterly.

“ Of course. One has to with a husband. It’s the only way to make marriage a success.”

“ You call this making it a success ? I was ready enough to have your uncle, I was delighted to have him, and would be delighted to have him back at anytime, but I cannot, and will not, stand the cool young man, and I have told him so.”

“ You have told him so ? ” Her eyes were astonished, and then angry.

“ I have, and I will tell him again. Is an Englishman’s home his castle, or isn’t it ? ”

“ An Englishman’s home is half the Englishman’s wife’s, or should be,” she retorted, “ you have asked him to go, and I have asked him to stay. We will see which he decides to do. How like you to go spoilin’ everythin’, an’ Kathleen comin’ up to dinner to-night in that new frock I got for her ! If only she will hide her brains an’ determined character ! ”

I did not see what Kathleen had got to do with it and said so, adding quickly, “ I know quite well why you asked him, and I consider it little short of disgraceful ; that sort of thing ought to be left to—er—time. I think it is horrible to think of it at all.”

“ There would be no marriage if women didn’t think of it—” she began.

"I don't know that that would be such a loss," I retorted.

"Still hankerin', I suppose. Pity there aren't any giddy grass-widows here."

Neither did I see what grass-widows had to do with it. It was for her actual widowhood Sophonisba was "nursing up" the cool young man, and his millions, and the very thought of her cold-blooded and heartless calculation, maddened me, and made me hate my eighteen years to the bad as I have never hated them before, and at no time have I been actually fond of them.

"A widow—" I began, "a nice widow, I mean, owes something to her husband's memory."

"Sometimes she owes more to her tradespeople," sneered Sophonisba, "and grass-widows aren't so green as they'd like you to think. Yours isn't green at all——"

"It will be time enough to talk about my widow when I've got one," I said resentfully.

"Go an' get one then if that's what you want! You needn't think I care! There's widowers too, come to that!"

"But cool young men are easier obtained," I reminded her, "pray do not think I am claiming Master Bung the Brewer against the rules of the game. As you have reminded me I am always found out when I cheat."

"Ever since that awful honeymoon you've got more an' more like a regular husband! Oh, Edward, that it should come to this!" Her voice shook, "An' just because I think it's my duty to consider the future, and where could one get better prospects? All mapped out as plain as plain, an' you try to spoil everythin'. Why have you taken such a prejudice against him?"

Why don't you like the idea of his being in the family ? Don't you fancy the connection ? ”

“ Odd as you may think me, Sophonisba, even eccentric if you will, I most emphatically do not want him in the family, and I do not fancy the connection.”

“ How strange you look and sound ! Aren't you well, dear ? ”

Her voice was anxious—over-anxious.

“ I am extremely well,” I said aggressively, “ never better, and I mean to remain well, Sophonisba. My grandfather lived to ninety.”

“ How horrid—poor old thing,” she murmured absently, “ I hope I shan't, I'm sure.”

“ Oh you might have a fourth by then,” I snorted.

“ A fourth what ? ” she asked staring. “ Have you been in the sun, dear ? You know it's dangerous standin' in the blaze as you do without a hat or——”

“ Hair ? ” I snapped, “ I have hair, Sophonisba, plenty of it. I have no wish to be mistaken for the head of a mop.”

“ Of course not,” she said soothingly, “ an' nobody would mistake you even for a littlest one, dear. An' I wasn't goin' to say you had no hair—I know you have when one looks for it—I was only goin' to say without a lot of hair, but you seem so shirty about simply everythin' perhaps I'd better not venture to speak at all. I suppose men are like that not bein' able to hide their feelin's the same when they're taken away from them, but I thought you were gettin' over it ! I thought you would be different soon as we got back, but you're worse than ever, and now you've got your knife into poor Ernest, one of the nicest, richest young men I've ever met, an' a simply toppin' car,—he's brought the new one. The dog-cart can go quite nicely in the shed.”

"Perhaps you would like me to go in the shed too?"

"Oh no, Angus will see to all that. Then Edward, you will tell the boy you were only jokin', an' ask him to stay? Here he's comin' now—how lucky!"

I didn't see where the luck came in and said so, "I'll see him—" I began.

"Oh hush dear, think of the poor pater! So here you are Ernest, Edward was wonderin' where you had got to. He was afraid you might have taken his little joke seriously."

"Little joke! Oh you mean about clearin' out, Mrs. Delland? Well, do you know the old chap got the laugh of me all right, fairly pulled my leg, he did. I was just off to pack, give you my word, I was, when suddenly I saw it an' burst out laughin'. I thought I'd come an' ask you though to make sure."

"It wasn't a joke," I said icily.

He burst out laughing, and Sophonisba laughed too, "There he goes again," he exclaimed, "What a sense of humour! Almost took me in, I give you my word, Mrs. Delland."

"Sometimes he almost takes me in," said Sophonisba lightly.

Then, before I could speak, Satan came and greeted him as a long-lost brother, and Edward the Second and Billium burst on the scene and demanded was it true the cool young man had brought a motor-car, and to be shown it at once.

He went off only too ready to obey, and I knew, with awful bitterness, that the boys were his friends for life. They loved him at first sight—because he owned a motor-car, and a motor had engines, and ran over things, and sometimes got the better of policemen. I was merely their father: the cool young man was a hero. Doubtless he would some day be their step-

father, and everybody would forget there had been such a person as me ?

Then Sophonisba turned to me, "I am not blind," she said coldly, "I know why you're lookin' like a sick cow, Edward, or as if your liver was goin' to make trouble. You're still hankerin', an' you can't forget that before you came on the scene, somebody else had it all his own way, an' that perhaps somebody else will be havin' it all his own way now. That accounts for all your silly prejudice an' opposition an' things. You're as jealous as they make 'em, an' you can't deny it ?"

Yet she looked as if she wanted me to deny it.

"I may consider that I have cause," I returned.

"At your age ! Are men never safe !"

"Do you mean safe to be blind, Sophonisba ? Ancient as I am, a mere decrepit wreck with one foot in the grave, I am not yet ancient enough to be totally blind and deaf and dumb—the ideal husband in fact."

"You are funny," she gasped.

"And if I have one foot in the grave," I went on, "I should like to point out to you that there is still one foot left out and that foot is going to keep above ground for a few more years to come, Mrs. Delland."

Sophonisba's face grew crimson, and she jumped up from her chair, "Mrs. Delland !" she gasped, "How dare you call me names !"

"I called you by your name, even if it isn't the name you prefer," I retorted. That a woman should prefer to be called Mrs. Bung to Mrs. Delland !

"I couldn't have believed it," she got out at last, "I can hardly believe it now. That such things should come about, and all through a honeymoon !"

"The honeymoon came about through your uncle," I reminded her, "it is your side of the family that

I hold to blame. I only wish now that it is too late, that we had kept your uncle—for life if need-be—and let honeymoons and cool young men go hang ! ”

“ And I wish,” began Sophonisba in a strange trembling tone, “ I wish—Oh Edward there aren’t words for what I wish, or language either ! ” She fled suddenly from me into the house, and I did not see her again till close on dinner time when she greeted Kathleen and introduced the cool young man to her, who stared hard in his cool way, and said “ By Jove ! ” under his breath. Doubtless he already looked upon Kathleen as a member of his future family.

CHAPTER XX

I AM GOADED INTO INTRODUCING MY OWN VISITOR

NOBODY would believe the martyrdom of my life these days. Even Kathleen noticed it, and did her best to detach the cool young man from Sophonisba for my sake, but naturally he wasn't so easily detached, and when she succeeded, I was compelled to join their party to prevent him eluding both of us and getting back to Sophonisba.

It seemed to me that everybody was in a very nasty impatient temper. Sophonisba would hardly speak to me at all ; she said she had no patience ; Kathleen was not the unruffled person I was accustomed to ; and the cool young man—the cool young man was intolerable. Things have come to plain speaking between us on the matter of Sophonisba. He has no shame, no feeling ; he avows it openly.

“ Ever heard that two is company and three trumpery ? ” he asked only the other day when Kathleen had at last torn him away from Sophonisba, and I found them in the summer-house. He said it so that Kathleen could not hear, yet for all her innocent air, I could not but feel sure that she at least suspected the sense of his words.

I glared in answer, and Kathleen went outside to look at the swallows, so as to see if it was going to rain.

“ She's a ripper out an' out, I don't blame you mind, an' the new Bill puts it in one's head I suppose, an'

then it must be a fair treat to have somethin' decent to look at for a change, but you're overdoin' it a bit, old son, an' that's a fact. 'Hands off the goods' if you don't mind ! ”

Then Kathleen hurried away into the woods, and he hurried after Kathleen hoping she would lead to Sophonisba I suppose, and I hurried after him, my rage choking me. He actually commanded me to stand aside while he got engaged to my wife as her second husband.

“ Trumpery,” I got out, “ you dare to call me that ? ”

He looked back over his shoulder at me in an impatient way, “ Oh be a sport ! Play the game ! Give a chap a chance ! Can't you get a fourth come to that, and let us all be a happy jolly little party ? There's Mrs. Delland——”

“ She also suggests a fourth ? ” I asked with dangerous calm.

“ She's awfully put out about the way you are goin' on, spoilin' things,” he went on sullenly, “ she thinks it's jolly selfish, and said so. She said you made her feel ashamed of you, and there was a time when she simply wouldn't have believed you'd behave in such a fashion. Oh she's pretty well fed up with it all, and I don't wonder ! ”

“ And what about me being ‘ fed up ’ as you so elegantly express it ? ” I returned, “ I have nothing to complain of, of course ? I must see her snatched away under my nose and say nothing, or ‘ thank you ’ like the gardener's wife's husband ? ”

“ The gardener's wife's husband,” he repeated after me, “ Is it a French exercise ? ”

“ Need we trifle ? You have been good enough to speak very plainly, and I intend to speak plainly too.

I won't have it, and that's flat! You can wait till I'm dead."

"What a rum idea! I might have to wait a bit, mightn't I? You're not as frightfully old as all that, good for another ten years I daresay——"

"Ten! Twenty! Thirty! Forty!" I exploded.

"Oh I say that's comin' it a bit thick, ain't it? Why you're old enough to be my father!"

"Nothing of the sort. I won't have you running after her like this!"

"I say you're a pretty sickenin' beast, ain't you? A regular dog-in-the-manger. Isn't the poor girl to have a say? Do you think she'd look at you even if things were different, as long as I was by, me young enough to be your son? Why, you haven't even got a motor-car! Hang it all, you're nothin' but a pedestrian, an' you bet, she looks a bit above that sort of thing! There's nothin' low-class about her."

And Sophonisba could encourage the advances of this utter vulgarian because he was young, slim, not ill-looking in his way, and cool—cool as a cucumber! I could buy a motor-car myself if it came to that, not that I had any intention of doing anything of the sort. If she could not care for me for myself, I certainly would not attempt to bribe her affections. I did not even aspire to a brewery. I only aspired to have my wife and home to myself.

"I say," went on the cool young man, "I wouldn't let Mrs. Delland know I was gone on her if I were you. She mightn't like it. After all, women, specially wives, have their feelin's you know, even when they're different, and after the way you went it at the Esplanade Hotel, she might think it pretty well the limit. I must say I should never have guessed you were that sort to look at you, but there, one never knows!"

Throw up the sponge old boy and the sinful life and all that you know, and run on the square. It pays, you know." His voice was urgent and very grave, "One's got to be decent ; I don't say it isn't a bit of a tug now and then, still it's got to be done, and a married man specially. 'Course you couldn't help gettin' a bit gone, she's a stunner, but you needn't show it or encourage it. It's not as if she wanted you around. She's given you the hint as plain as plain many a time, only you've never seen it."

"Pardon me," I returned icily, "I have seen it, if I have not always chosen to take it. I have some sort of right to a little attention now and then, I suppose ?"

"Don't know that I agree in backin' up that sort of right, seein' what it's come to before now. 'Keep off the grass' is my motto to tell you the truth. Mind, I don't say I shall ask her to take me on definitely, but a chap's got to be married sooner or later, and owes it to himself to prospect a bit when he sees a likely one. I don't mind ownin' I've never seen a more likely one, but then her character may be disappointin' when one gets to know her better, and 'slow and sure' is a good motto too. I hate these new-fangled rotten ideas, about women bein' equal, an' havin' as good brains, an' as good a right to use 'em, as men. Tosh I call it ! I have no use for a woman with brains. Give me a simple little thing that will look up to you an' all that. That's what I'm taken with if you want to know the truth. Timid and clingin' an' all that. Everythin' would go along all right if it wasn't for you always makin' a three. Chuck it do ! Can't you tool round somebody too, so as to make it all square. Sure Mrs. Delland wouldn't mind ; she's ever so kind an' tactful, an' husbands and wives ought to help each other, then we would be four, goin' about two by two

like the animals and the ark. I say, think it over, there's a good chap. After all marriage is a pretty serious biz, ain't it ? ”

“ Extremely serious,” I said bitterly.

“ You're enough to choke a chap off it, your tone and face, I can tell you ! Mrs. Delland won't be pleased if she loses me through you.”

“ Oh really—” I began chokingly.

He took the words out of my mouth, “ Yes, really. I suppose you think me a cool sort of beggar sayin' things out like this ? ”

“ Cool ? Oh not at all.”

“ Then that's all right. I was afraid you might think I was conceited or somethin' just because I've got my eyes open, don't you know, but it ain't that at all. You see half a million is half a million these days, and they've been after me like flies since I got out of Etons, mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, the whole bang lot, and I'd be a bit of an ass if I didn't spot their little game pretty sharply. It's Mrs. Delland's duty in a sort of way, I don't bear any ill-will you know, she's got to take the future into consideration and lend a hand—two hands if needbe. As for her she's innocent as the babe unborn, a dear simple little thing, regular country rosebud.”

“ This is intolerable ! ” I burst out, and I have an idea I raised my stick. I would not have Sophonisba alluded to as an angler for a husband in one breath, and a rosebud in another. It was more than flesh and blood could bear.

Then Kathleen turned back and came up to us, and I pretended to be knocking off the leaves of a tree. Kathleen is beautiful and very clever, but I like her least of all my sisters-in-law. She is so very determined, and has a poor opinion of men, and a biting

tongue. Secretly I have always pitied the man who marries her, but so far there have been few suitors for her hand. Hill Land is rather an Adamless Eden, and Kathleen has always said: "Since it's a choice of two evils in matrimony, it's best to make sure of the rich fool." But no rich bachelor, fool or otherwise, has come to Hill Land.

"I refuse ever to discuss this subject again," I said hastily to my would-be successor, "It is outrageous, and the things you have dared to say are more than outrageous. You make me doubt the evidences of my own ears."

"All right, we'll ignore it then. It might be as well, but it's no harm to have had a show of hands. Guess I've got the four aces and the joker." He chuckled offensively.

I fell into step with Kathleen.

"Oh is that you, Edward," she said rather acidly, "Angus has been asking for you."

"Are you sure?" I asked astonished. I had seen him quite a short time before, and he had not said anything about it then.

"Of course I am sure!" And she flounced away. The cool young man followed.

I went and found Angus and asked him what he wanted, and he said he did not want anything.

"But Miss Kearness said you were looking for me?" I exclaimed with some irritation.

"Oh did she, sir——?" He leaned thoughtfully on his spade, "Then maybe I was. The young chap was with her, sir, I suppose?"

"He was," I answered shortly.

"I see, sir. Well maybe this here garden is getting a bit crowded-like."

"That's a mild way of putting it," I said.

“Folk don’t like crowds, sir, when they get took that way, it’s agin human natur. Three is fair agin sense and decency. It ain’t kind, sir, and that’s a fact, and I never thought to live to see you taking that sort of hand. He’s no better’n a motor-luney, but he’s got the ’oof which comes in mighty handy, and even motor-luneys have their uses. Folk can make them into husbands, sir, when folk is set on it, ’long as other folk don’t hinder if they won’t help. It’s hard on Miss Soapy, sir, after all the hard work she’s put into it, and the rare trouble she’s been taking.”

Angus always calls Sophonisba Miss Soapy, because she was Miss Soapy to all the village long before I came on the scene at all—when he is speaking to me that is, outside he alludes to “the missus,” or “Mrs. Delland.” Dorothea is “my missus.”

“You too, Angus!” I sighed, more in sorrow than in anger.

“I’ve been that muddled lately, sir,” he went on “it’s muddling when folks what you could have sworn were this and that, turn out to be quite otherwise.”

“If you are muddled,” I burst out, “what about me? I tell you half the time I’m so bewildered that I don’t know whether I’m standing on my head or my heels, and the other half I don’t care!”

“You leave folk to paddle their own canoes, sir, if you ask me; it’s wonderful how handy-like they are with the paddles—wimmin. Born to it, sir, and taking to it straight out of the cradle, like a young duck to water. They starts practising on dolls. Why, we haven’t a chance, sir, and that’s a fact, unless we’re poor, then maybe we wouldn’t mind if we had a chance. But four is the game to play, sir, you mark my words. There’s Miss Soapy now. Why not two and two, sir,

like the good old days afore that there uncle put his cloven hoof in this here gardin ? Think of the advertisement, sir. It's an awful lot of help when folk ain't quite certain whether to do or not—a little joodicious advertisement."

I came away without answering. Even Angus wanted me to get a fourth to relieve the situation. Sophonisba would be boldly advocating it next ! I hurried to find her, and for once I was before the cool young man. She was sitting in the shade with a book on her knee, but she was not reading. She looked tired and worried and rather cross. She was wondering where the cool young man had got to, I suppose. I had no intention of finding him for her.

"I've just been with Kathleen and the cool young man, and—" I began.

Sophonisba leaned back in an exhausted fashion, "Oh, Edward, again ! How often have I told you—"

"In the marriage service it's the woman who promises to obey, not the man," I reminded her sharply.

"What bosh Edward ! As if all women haven't the presence of mind to say 'I will' aloud, and 'not' very firmly to themselves, and see that it's the 'not' which counts. I did."

"So it seems," I said.

"A woman always obeys her husband when she wants to do the things. I don't see what any man could ask more."

"Perhaps the less they ask, the better !" I retorted bitterly.

"To think of the trouble I took to marry you, an' for this ! To think that only a few months ago—before uncle came—we lived in Eden, now it's the Other Place ! What with the way my tooth goes on

at night, an' the way you go on durin' the day, I almost wish I had never got married after all ! ”

“ Why not go to the dentist ? ” I asked coldly.

She shuddered, told me to hush, and hurriedly changed the subject.

“ If only Ernest had been stayin' in those days,” she went on, “ How different it would be, an' such a good advertisement ! I'm not sure of him even yet, very far from sure, and Kathleen is almost too determined. I'm afraid he may see it.”

“ He does,” I said drily, “ he told me so.” He had made no bones about the annoyance of Kathleen interfering between himself and Sophonisba.

She bounced up in her chair, “ You don't mean he's mentioned it to you ? ”

“ I do.”

“ And you tried to choke him off it of course ? ”

“ Did you expect me to encourage him ? ”

“ I certainly did not expect you would try an' upset my plans like this, but I warn you Edward, I mean to win just the same. How thankful I shall be when it's all settled, an' to think you even wanted a daughter ! Pansy told me you had a terrible strain of obstinacy in you, an' that one never knew when one had you, an' I didn't believe her then. I do now. Why this ‘ three ’ business alone proves it. Anybody but you would see that three is the most unlucky number in the world, but either you don't see it or you see it, an' simply don't care. All you care about, is your silly prejudice against that poor harmless boy.”

“ I would hardly call it silly,” I said.

“ No, that is too mild a term. An' this ‘ three ’ mania is worse than silly. Edward, why not a four ? Two twos make a four, you know ? ” She looked at me beguilingly, but I was in no mood to be beguiled.

“Do they?” was all I said, “sometimes they make a crowd, Sophonisba. Are you determined I should find a fourth?”

“Oh I have my pride. Not if you don’t want it, naturally.”

“Does it matter about me?”

“Now you’re startin’ off again! But I tell you I mean to put a stop to this three business somehow or other.”

“Your intentions are open at least,” I sneered, “I cannot accuse you of hypocrisy, Sophonisba. Some might say that a little more hypocrisy might denote a little more decency. As for a fourth, I will do what I think best about that. I have no intention of being told who I shall ask to make up that number, and who I shall not ask——”

“But——” she began.

I did not wait to hear what she had to say. I went.

I found Percy Kearness up and dressed, almost himself again, rather better than his old self in fact, for he was less fat, less suffused in colour, and his strange light eyes were clearer than they had been for a long time.

“Hullo, Edward, thought you were never going to look poor old Percy up again!” was his greeting to me, “What’s up! Liver?”

“No, a visitor,” I said curtly, “a poisonous young devil if you want to know. He’s Sophonisba’s guest, and I don’t see why I shouldn’t have a guest too. Will you come back with me?”

He opened his eyes very wide, “But Soapy?”

I waved my hand, “if a man isn’t master in his own house, in whose house is he master?” I demanded, “Sophonisba asked this person against my express permission, and I certainly shall not consult her on

the matter of my own invitations, to say nothing of the fact that you are her uncle, and she will naturally be delighted to welcome you."

"Well, pass Soapy," he observed, "what about Angus?"

"What has Angus to do with my guests?" I enquired, "Is he my keeper? Are you aware he is not even my gardener, merely the man who gardens?"

"He might want to make me useful setting wasp-traps," objected Sophonisba's uncle, "then I might fall out of the tree again, and this time I might get really hurt. It's awfully good of you, old chap, and I should love to get back into decent quarters again—this Macdonald nurse is a regular icicle, no go at all about her—but unless you can guarantee that nothing I don't want to happen will happen, well, I think I am almost better where I am."

"I will guarantee it," I said grimly. I would tell Angus that if another accident happened to Sophonisba's uncle, the services of my gardener would be at liberty.

"My dear fellow can you conquer fate?"

"I can and will," I said, "fate and I understand each other perfectly. He never goes against my direct wishes." I did not add "unless he thinks it best for me."

"Then I will risk it," he said, "wait till I pack my bag, will you?"

I nodded.

A sudden thought seemed to strike him, "Tell you what, it will take me some time. Just you hop back to Moss End and get over your interview with Angus. Then call for me, d'yer see? and I will be ready."

"Very well," I said, not too willingly. I did not

look forward to my interview with Angus. I rather dreaded what he would say.

He did not say a word, which somehow made it almost worse, for his face can be very expressive. He understood my meaning however and bowed to my decision, but as one bows to the decision of a lunatic put over one by circumstances.

"I have given my guarantee," I said, "and you must keep it."

He spat into a flower-bed, and taking up his spade walked away.

I returned for Percy who was ready, bag and all. I must say the latter looked more disreputable than ever, almost wanton. Well it served Sophonisba right, and after all he was her uncle, and she had her visitor whether I liked it or not.

"Angus make any objection to my visit ? " he asked.

"Angus is my servant," I returned with some hauteur, "it is hardly his place to object."

"Is the guarantee to be trusted, also the hoe ? "

"Both are absolutely to be trusted," I returned briefly, and Percy got into the cab.

There was nobody about when we arrived at Moss End, and I carried his bag up the stairs myself, and saw him into the second-best spare room. Of course the cool young man had to have the best of everything.

Then, leaving him to unpack, I sought Sophonisba. I found her alone with the cool young man, their heads very close together. I heard her call him "My dear Ernest," I saw her lay her hand on his arm. My blood boiled. I felt equal to anything. If I had brought the devil home and established him in our second-best spare room I could have gloried in it, and have told her what I had done with triumph and decision. And

all I had done was to bring her most unfortunate uncle back to the only real home he had ever known.

Kathleen came up the drive, and the cool young man, with a cool defiant grin at me, went to meet her, and I turned to Sophonisba, and in a few cold decided words told her what I had done, and meant to continue to do, adding "He is my guest."

I cannot repeat what Sophonisba said. As a matter of fact I would never get it printed.

CHAPTER XXI

A VISIT TO THE DENTIST

I DISCOVERED Sophonisba, flushed and breathless, in hot pursuit of Edward the Second, who aided by Billium, was avoiding capture with a dogged determination I could only admire.

Then Sophonisba caught sight of me, and commanded me, briefly and crossly, to lend my aid in the battle of elders, versus juniors ; big, versus little.

I did not at once comply, "What's he done ?" I asked.

"Nothin', at least nothin' more than usual. It isn't that. It's the dentist."

"You are going to the dentist at last ?" I exclaimed relieved. That tooth of Sophonisba's had been giving both of us a lot of trouble lately.

Sophonisba frowned, "I am takin' Edward the Second to the dentist," she said coldly, "he's got a bad tooth, an' the wretched little coward won't be a man an' have it out." This was partly for Edward the Second's benefit. Sophonisba had an idea, that goaded by the word "coward," the boy would there and then demand to be taken to have his tooth out, but Sophonisba's idea was wrong.

"Ain't," said our son, "haven't got t-t-toothache. T-t-tooth doesn't want c-c-comin' out. It says so."

"There," said my wife turning to me, "just what I said ! Funks it, an' everybody knows havin' a

tooth out doesn't hurt a bit, an' is more fun than anythin', specially when one can earn a shillin' so easy ! ”

I said nothing. I did not know how Sophonisba could know that having a tooth out was more an amusement than anything else, for she had never had one out in her life.

Edward the Second had memories ; he had had one out not so long since, and he had not liked it much, and had declared the shilling dearly earned.

“ Dessay I could earn a s-s-shillin' without havin' a toof out,” he remarked eyeing me , “ Billium an' me we could make l-l-lots s-s-sluggin'.”

They are paid so much a gross for the slugs they pop into the pail of salt water, and I am proud to say never think of cheating. When I pay for a gross of corpses I receive my gross of corpses, even if there remains no visible sign of the slaughter.

“ Now Edward, quick—catch him ! ” commanded Sophonisba, for my son had rather delivered himself into my hands.

I almost caught him.

“ How could you let him slip away like that ? Oh dear we will never be in time for the appointment ! Such a shame to keep a nice kind man like that waitin' ! ”

The boys made derisive sounds. They did not think Mr. Smith nice or kind, nor care how long they kept him waiting.

“ You shall have gas this time,” went on Sophonisba changing her tune from wrath to coaxing, “ an' half-a-crown afterwards. Your father will give you the half-crown. Do you know what laughin' gas is like ? It's simply lovely an' awful fun ; that's why they call it laughin' gas. You will simply love it, an' always be

wantin' to go. Now think how silly to go on havin' tooth-ache, when one tiny second when you don't feel anythin', will end it for you. Only a dreadful coward, and a silly selfish person, would hesitate, for tooth-ache is a nuisance to other people as well."

"Indeed it is," I agreed feelingly, thinking of sleepless nights when Sophonisba's had raged.

"Well then, there you are! Oh I've got him!" And she had! She usually got things in the end—Sophonisba. That the cool young man would prove an exception I could not believe. At the present moment he had strolled over to the vicarage with a message from Sophonisba to Kathleen. But if we were free of him for the time-being, we were not free of Sophonisba's uncle, who would neither be left alone with Sophonisba if he could help it, or anywhere within the vicinity of Angus, though Angus looked through him and round him and over him, and showed complete unconsciousness of his presence. I must own I was already more than a little tired of Percy Kearness and his insistent demands. He had failed as a fourth for nobody was pleased, and life at Moss End was little short of a martyrdom. Only the boys still adored him and his tales of adventure as of old, and were only too eager to imitate him in every way. Since he was rather free in his language before them, and often far from sober, the thought of the bad example he was setting them worried me more than a little, and I cursed the mad impulse that had made me hang the mill-stone once more round my neck. It had been fatally easy to get him back, but when it came to getting rid of him, it would be very far from easy. In the matter of Angus I had given my word, and I must keep it. Dully I supposed that Percy and the cool young man were with us for life.

“ My t-t-tooth doesn’t ache, it hasn’t a h-h-hole ! ” screamed Edward the Second desperately.

Sophonisba tightened her grasp, “ How dare you tell me such an untruth ! ” she exclaimed shocked, “ You know perfectly well it ached only the other day, an’ we found such a big hole that it must come out. You said you wanted it to come out.”

“ It h-h-hurt then, and now it does not h-h-hurt at all, stammered the boy earnestly, “ It just wants to be l-l-let alone, mum.”

“ Well it’s not goin’ to be let alone,” announced Sophonisba decidedly, and thrust him into the dog-cart, “ I’m ashamed to have such a little coward, an’ such a little story-teller, for a son. Of course you’ll drive us into Hill Town, Edward.”

I hesitated.

“ Oh you can stay outside, I will go in with him,” she said impatiently, and I took the reins.

On the way we met the cool young man, who was returning with Kathleen, and Sophonisba asked me to stop. I obeyed, not too graciously. The cool young man looked at my dog-cart as if he had never seen anything so obsolete before, and trusted never to again, and informed Sophonisba he was thinking of taking her out for a run that afternoon, and having a sort of picnic, “ Bring your uncle,” he said, “ he will just make up a nice little party,” and Sophonisba said she would, and told me to drive on.

I drove on with rising temper.

“ At sight of the dentist’s abode, Edward the Second burst into a loud roar, and tried once more to run away.

“ Of all the little sillys ! ” exclaimed Sophonisba as she got a more secure hold of him, “ An’ Mr. Smith so really kind ! Why lots of people just think it’s fun.”

She rang the bell, dragging the reluctant and re-

sisting victim with her, and a nasty spiteful mood got hold of me. After all endurance has it's limits.

"While you are about it, Sophonisba," I observed quietly, "I would be extremely obliged if you would have out the tooth that keeps me awake at night."

Sophonisba turned round crimson and gasping, "Edward! You must be mad! I have never known anybody change so much or so suddenly, but I never thought you would become brutal." There were tears in her voice, "There is nothin' wrong with my tooth; it only wants to be left alone."

Edward the Second listened to our conversation with breathless interest, then he ceased struggling and crying, and said:

"If you'll have yours out mum, I'll have m-m-mine what doesn't a-a-ache either."

Sophonisba turned on me with a look I cannot describe, "Oh Edward see what you have done!" burst from her, "Now we've either both got to go home at once without keepin' the appointment, or we've got to go in, an'——." She paused pale and shuddering.

"You can have gas," I said, and perhaps I did not sound very sympathetic. Her unpleasant experience would only last a moment, and lifelong ease would come of it, but I was having teeth out all the time so to speak, and the places of the extracted were at once filled by others. It was wrench, wrench, without end. In the afternoon Sophonisba and the cool young man would drive and picnic together, while Kathleen and Percy Kearness went in some other direction.

"That it should come to this," she said tragically, and then resolutely she passed within, dogged determination on her face.

When they came out a little later, both faces were red and joyful, and Sophonisba climbed up to my side

with a laugh, "Why it was nothin' with gas," she exclaimed, "almost fun, wasn't it Edward the Second?"

But Edward the Second was not to be beguiled thus easily, "It was worth half-a-c-c-crown," he stated positively.

I gave it him.

"Once you would have given me somethin' too," sighed Sophonisba, "T'anyrate I wish you hadn't prevented me goin' before. It's so silly shillyin' an' shallyin' about a simple little thing like that."

CHAPTER XXII

A FRIEND FROM THE ESPLANADE HOTEL

SOPHONISBA was always cheerful, but never outrageously so. Since the coming of the cool young man, she has, I regret to say, become distinctly frivolous.

For instance the other day in the kitchen-garden, I caught sight of a pink skirt round the gooseberry bushes, and the cool young man in hot pursuit. It was more than I could stand. I dashed up to him in wrath, but the pink skirt and it's wearer had disappeared.

"What are you doing among my gooseberry bushes?" I demanded.

"Eatin' gooseberries," he retorted, "Have one?" And the one he offered was not even ripe.

I came away because I dare not trust myself to reply, and came upon Sophonisba sitting under a tree on the lawn, as cool and collected as you please. She actually turned to me and said:

"Wherever have you been? I've been lookin' for you for ages?"

"I'm rather past the age when one is discovered under gooseberry bushes, Sophonisba," I returned, and went into the house and sat by myself.

Then Percy Kearness must find me and demand that I should accompany him round the garden. He will not go alone for fear of coming across Angus, for though he knows I have guaranteed Angus, yet he

likes me to be there as well as the guarantee. When I am there he is ready to be quite conversational with Angus, in spite of Angus' attitude which is far otherwise.

So I had to get up and go and listen to some stories of adventure, which, with slight variations, I had already heard a dozen times before. Then we chanced upon Angus, and Angus touching his forehead to me, looked over Percy's head with dogged determination, and fell to hoeing almost viciously.

"This hot weather leaves even your energy unimpaired, it is wonderful," sighed Percy enviously "Now I could not hoe like that if you paid me! How hard you go at it. Aren't you afraid of doing yourself an injury?"

Angus, hoeing harder than ever, made no reply.

"The faster one removes slugs the faster they come," I sighed, rather hastily changing the conversation, "I did think those traps would quite rid us of pests, Angus."

"I didn't, sir," returned Angus rather curtly.

"They were advertised as infallible."

"Dunno as it's much good getting rid of vermin in this here garden. You go to a lot of trouble outing them proper, and then they comes back."

"How very trying to be sure!" sympathised Sophonisba's uncle.

I drew him away, and listened to another half-dozen stories. It was a dreary morning.

The afternoon was not much better. The cool young man, who is full of pointless idiotic jokes which he proudly says he invents himself—and I do not doubt it—invented another, the most irritating and idiotic of all.

He kept running up to me and calling me "Adam?"

Adam ? ” knowing as well as I did my name was Edward. Knowing there was some “ catch ” about it I said nothing, just went on planting out the seedlings. I supposed it had something to do with a garden or gardener.

However when he kept at it I got irritated, and told him my name was no more Adam than his own, and he would be good enough to remember it.

He grinned and said that was not the right answer, and that he knew he’d “ have ” me in the end ; he always did. Then he asked me if I would like to know the right answer, and I said very firmly that I would not. Even his coolness was shaken by annoyance.

“ When I say Adam (’ad ’em), see ? You should say, ‘ no, I adn’t. ’ ” Then the laugh would be on your side, old man. I made it up myself.”

“ It sounds that sort of a thing,” I said wearily.

“ Surely you see the point ? ” he asked astonished, “ why Mrs. Delland would see it at once. But then she has a great sense of humour. Wit is never wasted on her.”

“ I don’t think wit is wasted on me,” I returned. Later I repeated the thing to Sophonisba and asked her to tell me the point. “ When I told him my name wasn’t Adam, he said the right answer was, ‘ No I wouldn’t, ’ ” I complained pettishly, “ Would you mind translating ? ”

Sophonisba told me it was very stupid of me not to see it ; that it was as obvious as it was witty, and that I had no right to make out that it wasn’t, specially before Kathleen. “ When you’ve made up your mind to swallow a pill, you don’t want people pointin’ out that it’s sure to have rather a beastly taste. You want people to remind you how jolly it looks with gilt an’ all that, an’ how other people would be glad enough

to swallow it. But you go about spoilin' everythin'. I wish you would get rid of uncle. Guess what Edward the Second said yesterday ? ” She repeated a strong expression. It is one that, in exasperated moments, she uses herself.

I reminded her of this fact.

She got red and angry, “ I’ve never said worse than ‘ bother ’ before the boys in my life ! ” she exclaimed, “ I have always been most careful, an’ seen that you were careful too. But uncle just says anythin’, an’ they fasten on to it at once, an’ they think he’s nicer an’ funnier than ever when he’s not very sober, an’ Jane is takin’ to wearin’ flighty clothes on her days out. She’ll be wearin’ my best hats next, an’ the poisonous thing is, they’ll suit her much better than they suit me. *That’s* what makes me so mad. She’ll look a dream in them, whereas I only look a nightmare. Oh how sickenin’ everythin’ is, an’ Dorothea turnin’ quite rusty because of uncle bein’ brought back.”

“ Angus will hardly speak to me,” I sighed.

“ I don’t wonder. After all the trouble the poor man had gone to, an’ all for nothin’ ! How could you be so mad ? Never, never, will we get rid of him without scandal. He will go to the workhouse or he will sell bootlaces—those nasty sticky kind. An’ we shan’t dare to look at our friends’ boots knowin’ they will have bought them from him out of charity, an’ how low they think us. I ask you when is he goin’ ? ”

“ It’s rather like the cool young man’s riddles,” I returned, “ a problem beyond my limited intelligence. Perhaps when the cool young man has gone himself it will be time enough to talk of turning our own flesh and blood into the gutter.” After all Percy Kearness was by far the lesser evil. He thought no more of the

cool young man that I did, though polite enough to his face. I knew his sympathy was entirely mine, and situated as I was, that was certainly something. There was somebody left for me to walk about with when Sophonisba disappeared with the cool young man.

This person adopts the whole family in a most possessive way ; it might be already his. Mr. and Mrs. Kearness might almost be his father and mother-in-law. Only the other day he said it was plain where Mrs. Kearness' daughters got their looks from, and how lucky, that they had, for the most part, escaped taking after Mr. Kearness.

"Your sister Kathleen is as pretty as a picture," he remarked condescendingly to Sophonisba.

"Oh—— do you think so ?" asked Sophonisba carelessly, "young men always tell me that."

The cool young man looked none too pleased, "Pretty as a picture without a frame," he persisted.

Sophonisba shrugged her shoulders, "Well frames cost money," she said, "I daresay she would be pretty enough as girls go, if she could afford the clothes to show herself off."

"I think you hardly realise how very lovely she is !" The cool young man showed heat, I thought, "She ought to have a gilt frame," he added.

Sophonisba laughed, "Who is to provide such an extravagance ?"

He dropped his voice, "A husband might ?"

"Oh a husband, I had not thought of that." She seemed astonished ; and I was astonished too. I had always understood she had thought quite a lot about the matter one way and another.

"Oh I expect you have thought of it," he said looking at her hard, "one naturally would."

"Oh some day of course," she agreed, "but there's

no hurry, is there? And then Kathleen naturally has a fairly wide choice as the beauty of the place. She's so fastidious. I'm afraid she would never marry just an ordinary young man."

"I did not mean an ordinary young man." He spoke a little stiffly.

Sophonisba laughed again, "You remind me of Mrs. Smith. She said only the other day, 'Your lovely sister ought to marry a real 'igh gent'! Doesn't it sound odd? Mrs. Dodd said she must mean a duke or a County Family.'"

"County Families!" The cool young man's voice was full of disgust and contempt, "Why I know two, and what do you think they are?"

"Burglars?" guessed Sophonisba.

"Congenital idiots?" I ventured.

He waved aside our suggestions as feeble in the extreme, "Worse, far worse," he exclaimed, and added, dropping his voice, "*pedestrians!*"

"Really," gasped Sophonisba.

"Yes, on my honour! A bit thick, eh! I just chucked the beggars. After all a chap owes himself somethin'—what. Mark my words Mrs. Delland, I should not wonder if your sister did better than a County Family by a long chalk. You would not surprise me much if she got into a Motor-car Family."

"Oh Kathleen isn't as ambitious as all that," said Sophonisba, which statement surprised me rather, for I had myself heard my sister-in-law say, "Imagine marrying a man without a car. It would be swallowing the powder without the jam."

"But—" I began.

Sophonisba burst in at once, "But you never know," she said hurriedly, "and of course Mr. Turner may get a car now."

Mr. Turner has been rejected by Kathleen rather frequently I believe. He is hopelessly ineligible as a husband, but some one left him £500 the other day, and it is of course possible that he may spend it so, though I hardly think it is likely myself.

“That fellar!” And the cool young man looked startled.

“Of course he is not really well-off,” went on Sophonisba, “but he is absolutely devoted to her, and would make her a very good husband. You see I want her to marry for love, some one she can look up to, and depend on, some one we can all be proud of as a member of our family.”

“A cat couldn’t be proud of that Turner fellar,” declared the cool young man with venom.

Sophonisba dropped her eyes, “O course it may not come to that,” she said, “but he is very persistent, you know.”

The cool young man got up and the front gate clanged to after him.

“That’s all right,” said Sophonisba, and leaned back and closed her eyes, “Oh Edward what work it’s been! An’ you preventin’, everybody puttin’ a spoke in my wheel. Brains don’t matter in a husband, the less brains, the more satisfactory as husbands.”

“You are quite too kind,” I said icily, and the front gate clanged after me too.

I wandered aimlessly round the lanes, free for once of Sophonisba’s uncle, and the cool young man, but none the less lonely and desolate. I seemed strangely devoid of friends and sympathisers. There was no place for me within my gates, and even less of a place outside them. It is not a pleasant state of affairs.

As I was about to pass the artistic house on my way

back, I met the Admiral. He was carrying his field-glasses, a sight which annoyed me, for to me it seemed hardly necessary that he should know all about the movements of Sophonisba and the Brewery heir. My acknowledgment of his greeting was of the curtest. He however was not minded to be so dismissed, and more or less button-holed me.

"Fine day," he began.

"Is it?"

"So your pretty friend is going to be your nearest neighbour? Lucky dog! Ain't you delighted?"

As I did not in the least know what he was talking about, I made no reply.

"Wonder how I know, eh? Well I happened to be looking through my telescope and I saw her get out of the cab, and go inside." He waved his hand towards the artistic house in which I noted—somewhat to my surprise—signs of habitation.

"There's a tenant at last?" I asked with some interest, "Young Brown will be pleased."

"More than Brown will be pleased, I fancy!" He laughed long and loudly, "I happened to be outside when she came out of the house and I opened the cab door for her. She dropped her card-case. I picked it up with an appropriate word. She's obvious of course, but pretty and smart. It seems you had recommended the house to her when you were both at the Esplanade Hotel and she had come down to look at it, and at once fallen in love with and taken it."

"Not the grass-widow!" I gasped.

"A typical grass-widow," he returned, "name Mrs. Harrip; husband *non est*; the sort of husband that sort of woman always has!"

Just then the subject of our conversation came out of the house and down to the gate. She greeted me

ever so kindly, and bowed formally to the admiral who departed rather unwillingly.

"How ridiculously small the world is, isn't it?" said Mrs. Harrip to me, "So we meet again, and are neighbours! I hope you don't mind?"

"Mind!" I echoed, "why I am delighted, more delighted than I can say!" It was indeed pleasant to think that I had a friend now of my own. Mrs. understood the situation so perfectly, and her silent sympathy was very soothing. She always knew the right thing to say, and the right time to say it.

I went home feeling much more cheerful, looking it too, for Sophonisba asked me what had happened to make me so lively all of a sudden, "After goin' about like a bear with a sore head," she added.

"You will never guess," I returned, "You know what you said about the artistic house, and that it would never let, and that if it did, there would be something odd about the tenant, well, my dear, you were wrong."

"Please don't 'my dear' me as if we'd been born married to each other," returned Sophonisba rather sharply, "Well, who is the lunatic? Someone goin' to play the simple life game? They'll need to; the artistic house is built to fall down in a night."

"It isn't a lunatic," I retorted triumphantly, "it's Mrs. Harrip, Sophonisba."

But Sophonisba, though she looked startled, certainly did not look pleased, "Well I always said I wouldn't call on the tenant of a house like that, an' I shan't."

"But of course you must," I said disturbed, "I said you would on Monday when she'll be ready."

"So the mountain's come to Mahomet," she said crossly, a remark that I saw no sense in, "but I never heard that Mrs. Mahomet—if there was one, an' he

was the man who invented harems, wasn't he?—was called upon to take a hand. I cannot trust myself to call, Edward. No really sober person could get up that wimbly-wambly drive an' in at the front door; only a habitual drunkard could negotiate it, an' I have still some self-respect left."

"That is absurd," I said with heat, "I found no difficulty in the drive, or in the door."

Then Percy Kearness dug me in the ribs and said I was a gayer customer than one would suppose to look at me, "Don't bottle your widow up," he added giggling in rather an offensive fashion.

Sophonisba put Billium on his chair with a bang, "Already," she exclaimed, "well I might have known it! I suppose you have just returned from that drive now. You look giddy."

She grabbed Edward the Second and banged him on to his chair.

"I suppose she's started sayin' it was lonely? Has she talked about the 'dear departed,' or happened to mention to which bourne he has departed? Widows! It's easy sayin'!"

"You never liked her, never did her justice. She is a charming woman."

"All the women you aren't married to, are. I shan't go on Monday."

I knew why she would not go; a little because she did not really care for Mrs. Harrip, but more because she wished to spend her time with the cool young man.

"Then I will call alone, Sophonisba," I said.

She went very pink, "I suppose that's what you've both been playin' for all the time! As a matter of fact I shall certainly go, if only to see how one gets into the place, and what happens when one does. The front door is for ornament, not use."

“Everything works perfectly,” I said, “even the bath-water.”

“So you discuss her bath-water an’ her baths ! Really Edward ! ”

“Of course not,” I said irritated, “but she showed me over the house. It’s most handy. I was charmed.”

“You would be ; she would see to that.”

Then the cool young man sauntered in, and asked Percy what we were talking about and had to be told everything. He was interested to hear of Mrs. Harrip’s arrival, and said he would go with me to call on Monday.

Sophonisba went quite pale, and gave a little gasp, and I saw why she resented the appearance of Mrs. Harrip. She was jealous.

CHAPTER XXIII

MRS. HARRIP HELPS ME TO BEAR MY LOT

ON Monday we called in force on Mrs. Harrip who made herself charming to all of us, but specially to Sophonisba who was cold and critical I thought, and had hardly got outside the gate before she remarked in a tone of satisfaction, "Just what I thought! It's bound to fall down in a night. How silly she will look when it does—an' she's underneath it!"

I thought it an absurd, and not very nice thing to say, and said so.

The cool young man, to whom Mrs. Harrip had been very distant, observed rather spitefully that for his part he never could see that what happened to pedestrians mattered. "The less there are in the world, the pleasanter for Us," he said in his lordly way, and added "if the government was any good they'd have them exterminated."

I reminded him that a certain portion of the government belonged to the despised pedestrian class itself.

"No wonder the country's goin' to the dogs," he retorted gloomily, then ignoring me, he turned to Sophonisba, "Let's go for a little run," he suggested, "just the two of us, unless you think we ought to take your sister?" He hummed a little air.

To my surprise, Sophonisba, with her eye on me, said she thought they ought to take Kathleen. "Motorin'

is such a treat to her," she said, "she'd never be a pedestrian by choice, you know. She thinks of them just as you do. You might just drop in at the vicarage an' let her know, will you?"

He said he would.

"I thought you hated threes, now I find you advocating them," I observed, "is that logical?"

"It's a question of appearances—" she began.

"Why trouble about appearances?" I asked with some bitterness.

"Just the sort of thing a man would say!" she exclaimed, "why it doesn't matter what you do, or what you don't do, as long as appearances are all right, an' people don't know."

"Indeed," I said, "but what if 'people' guess, Sophonisba?"

"Guessin' isn't evidence," she retorted, and went to get ready for her run.

I went into the garden, and gathering a huge mass of flowers, took them to Mrs. Harrip, who ordered fresh tea, and was so kind and soothing, that I felt—if still miserable—yet a little less miserable.

"I saw your wife go past in the car," she said, "don't you care for motoring?"

I coloured slightly. As I did not care to say I had not been asked, I said nothing.

She put one of my roses in her hair, looked at herself in the glass, and turned laughing to me, "Does it make me look a fright?" she demanded. "How vain you must think me! But women are vain, are they not? It takes a man to be above such a thing."

"All women aren't vain," I returned, "my wife hasn't any vanity at all. Do you know she will not even look in a glass if she can help it."

"Mrs. Delland is so original in every way one can

understand it," she murmured, "now I am not in the least original."

"Aren't you? Of course Sophonisba *is* rather unique."

"She is indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Harrip, "I suppose one never tires of the unique?"

"It would hardly be possible, would it?" I said gravely.

"Ernest Bung? He likes people to be unique?"

I winced, but determined not to show my distress, "Oh she is chaperoning her sister Kathleen," I returned with studied indifference, "a beautiful girl is she not?"

"Possibly, as girls go. But your smart up-to-date young man doesn't notice girls much, does he? I suppose he's afraid it may turn out too expensive. It's so often the married woman, is it not?"

"Oh do you think so," I said as carelessly as I could, and rather quickly changed the subject.

Then she showed me how the patent meat-safe worked, and it was quite late ere I reached home.

The motor arrived there at the same time as I did, the cool young man very elated, "I showed her some drivin'," he said to me triumphantly, "that's the way to make 'em respect you. A fool of a hen came and lay down under the wheel, but I got off for three bob. The chap owned she couldn't lay for nuts when taxed with it."

"Just like ours," murmured Percy Kearness. He always speaks of "ours" when he does not speak of "mine."

Sophonisba turned to me, "I hope you have had a nice evenin'," she said, "What did she show you this time?"

I was considerably taken aback. How could Sophon-

isba know I had been with Mrs. Harrip, and yet she did know.

"The meat-safe," I said a little unwillingly.

"How romantic," giggled Percy, "real sentiment. She never showed me the meat-safe. I'm not quite sure that she didn't show me the door." He laughed uproariously. "Possibly she was expecting Edward and had no use for uncles. An uncle can merely hope to be amongst the 'also rans.' "

"It's not much use showin' people the door, when people won't take the hint," said Sophonisba sharply to her uncle.

"Ah well, there won't be a hint for Edward to take," returned Percy, "lucky dog, ain't he? Always had a soft spot for widows myself. Odd what a lot of 'em they are. Like the poor always with us—till they get another."

"Another what?" I asked sharply, displeased at Percy's tone.

"Another chance of bein' a widow!" said Sophonisba with a snort.

A few days later Sophonisba did her hair in the way I had advised, but did not like, put on the frilly frock, and sat formally in the drawing-room. She said the widow was going to call.

She was right as usual. The widow came, and Sophonisba was charming to her. In fact they took so much to each other that I found myself rather left out of it, and in the end left them alone together. Mrs. Harrip left shortly afterwards, but when I got ready to see her home, Sophonisba reminded me that I had to help her with an important letter, and I went into the library thankful to have her to myself if only for a moment or two.

"Most artistic," she said absently, sitting down, "I

do wonder how she does it. One sees that it is done, but not how. I wonder what her husband was like—if she ever had one.”

“ You’re forgetting she is a widow.”

“ It’s the last thing she allows one to forget *All* widows haven’t had husbands, Edward—at least so Pansy says.”

“ What an absurd statement ! By the bye, it must be rather lonely for her. Why not ask her to drop in here when she likes, or to spend the day ? ”

“ I will ask her to spend the day,” said Sophonisba at once, and an invitation was sent.

Again Sophonisba appeared with the new style of hair-dressing, and in her fashionable frock, rather putting Mrs. Harrip into the shade if the truth must be told, for her frock was just one of those plain fitting sort of things. I hardly got a word with Mrs. Harrip, Sophonisba had so much to say and to show her. They walked about arm in arm calling each other “ dear,” and the cool young man had to put up with Kathleen for once. I had Percy Kearness who was in a specially tiresome mood.

If it had not happened that Mrs. Harrip returned Sophonisba’s call when she was out, I doubt whether I should ever have got speech with her again. I told her how disappointed Sophonisba would be to miss her, and took her to see the garden. She was in the gayest highest spirits, a mere girl, almost an irresponsible child. Even my depression lifted a little, and we dodged round the gooseberry bushes and threw roses at each other, and I thought how much I should have enjoyed myself if Sophonisba, instead of Mrs. Harrip, had been in pursuit, and how much sooner I would have let Sophonisba catch me.

As it was she had hardly caught me before Sophon-

isba came home and chanced upon us. She was looking very cross, and the cool young man was not with her. I supposed that was why.

Mrs. Harrip said good-bye, and seeing her to her gate and refusing to go in for a few moments, I returned to dress for dinner. I found Sophonisba still in walking attire.

"Aren't you going to change?" I asked astonished, and pulled out my watch.

"So you've come back, have you," she said in very peculiar tones, "I hope you did not trouble on my account."

"Didn't you want me back?" I asked feeling stung. I knew she never wanted me now, yet hitherto she had never said so—in words.

She said a most extraordinary thing. "Oh go on actin' Joseph round the gooseberry bushes, Edward, but don't think I mind. I like it. Its what I call really f-f-funny." She blew her nose. "An' I saw you let her catch you," She blew her nose again.

"Well I saw you," I explained. The game had been all right as a game till Sophonisba appeared, and then it had grown wearisome. After all, I am too old for such absurdities.

"I see. I met the telescopin' admiral. He didn't see me. He was too busy lookin' through his beastly glasses. I wondered what was up. Now I know. It's not the first time they've been trained on our gooseberry bushes, an' I don't suppose it'll be the last."

I was annoyed at the wretched old man's idle curiosity, "He's interested in the widow," I said shortly.

"Dash the widow!" retorted Sophonisba. For some reason or other she was put out, and when she is put out, she occasionally makes remarks that I am

sure she regrets in calmer moments. It is odd to think that before Percy's coming all her moments were calm, and that now they seem very much otherwise. She says the boys catch it entirely from Percy, and that its disgraceful, but for my own part I sometimes wonder. That it is catching however there can be no possible doubt.

After that, when Sophonisba and the cool young man went off together, taking Kathleen for appearances sake, either Mrs. Harrip dropped in to call upon Sophonisba, or I dropped in to call upon Mrs. Harrip, and I am thankful to say we usually found each other at home. She was very fond of ripe gooseberries, and had none in her own garden. In her gay irresponsible fashion she would throw the skins at me. This lapse from strict conventuality was regarded as quite heinous by Sophonisba and the neighbourhood at large, and Pansy wrote me a letter beginning, "It's simply disgraceful," and ending, "*All* men go into the divorce court thinking they are going to look gay and wicked, and then just look silly," which was either entirely pointless or unpardonably impertinent, for if Sophonisba wishes to be free of me, I should find means less horrible than that.

I sent a curt line saying, "Conventionality can be overdone. Besides, why shouldn't she?"

After all they were my gooseberries, and I had learned to dodge skilfully enough when she threw the skins at me.

Then of course Pansy came down in person.

First of all she said it was dreadful that I should myself have brought back Sophonisba's awful reprobate uncle, to eat and drink us out of house and home. She added.

"*All* paupers have extra large appetites, and always ask for more."

I maintained a dignified silence.

"You needn't think I don't know why you asked him. Birds of a feather—— You wanted somebody to back you up in your iniquities, to say it didn't matter, perhaps just make a joke of it, and encourage you. Not that his was a widow. One must do him the justice to own he stopped short of that, and it wasn't as if the gardener wasn't a perfectly respectable and respectful person, and very much obliged. I have noticed a dreadful deterioration in you ever since the day he came, and even Sophonisba can't deny it. She owns you have changed."

"So has she!" I burst out.

"Not in the same way—not that she could even if she would. She's only changed because you have. What's a wife to do, especially one like poor Sophonisba? She's got to pretend of course. Even Sophonisba has her pride, and whatever she may look like, she is still your wife. *All* married women insist they are the only one whatever they believe or actually know. One has to do it. Not that I ever needed to. James is different——"

"What has James——"

"Poor Sophonisba! New frocks and fashionable coils don't go far on some. A freak is all right as a freak, it's when you dress it up that it really matters. Sophonisba never looks like a demi-mondaine in her clothes, but always perfectly respectable. That's the most fatal thing of all. One must be at least able to mistake you for the other sort, or you must change your dressmaker, not that changing would help Sophonisba. And the work she's had with that tiresome young man. Always coming, but never quite come, and of course she must not show her impatience or she might lose him altogether and that would be too

frightful. I tell you there's nothing more wearing than trying to make a man jump when he won't, as I happen to know—not that James had to be helped, but there have been others. Sophonisba complains that not content with making a scandal in the neighbourhood—quite a hideous scandal—you are putting spokes in her wheel the whole time. It made me ashamed to think I had brought you up. She says you are always asking questions, the sort a wife hates her husband to ask. *All* marriages might be a success if nobody asked any questions, and swallowed everything the other answered.”

This hardly struck me as logic, but I hadn't the spirit to say so.

“Edward I could not believe it at first! Why the skins alone would be evidence enough—cartloads of them! What a gourmande the woman must be!”

“Are you alluding to Mrs. Harrip?” I asked surprised.

Pansy stared, “Who else? Don't tell me there's another one. That would be too much, and at your age! The creature! Done up as anybody can see, I hear,—if well done up. What fools men are! Edward, it's got to be put a stop to, the whole neighbourhood is in a ferment. That dreadful old admiral is going about saying he always knew you were that sort of person, he had seen it in your eye long ago, only you were such a cunning devil—I am quoting him of course,” she added hastily. “No wonder Sophonisba is not as fat as she was, and looking almost pale. It's enough to wear her to skin and bone if that ever was possible. That Bung creature is simply the wiliest fish, and every time she tries to pull him in he breaks away again. And what with you and Ernest Bung and that wretched pauper calling himself her uncle, the poor dear's life simply isn't worth living.”

“If she can’t live without him she must have him, I suppose,” I said sulkily, “there must be some way without taking it to court.”

She looked at me in horror, and gasped a little, “Taking it to court! A decent woman doesn’t do that sort of thing! No matter how heavy the damages obtained, the loss of prestige is fatal—for people who have some to start with, I mean. Of course the people who bring such cases usually haven’t. I am surprised you should think of such a thing. She would die rather, lose him even. Besides, there is no evidence. Only writing things count, and he’s far too sharp. I have made one or two suggestions, and she’s going to try those; after all, I have two rich sons-in-law, and one of them did make an effort not to.”

What on earth her son-in-law had to do with the cool young man and Sophonisba I could not see, but it is useless telling Pansy you do not understand. She merely thinks—possibly says—you are a fool, or if not a fool, absurdly dense, and though I was dense as a shy bachelor, marriage soon opened my eyes, happily for the first years of my marriage, though unhappily for the latter period, for I would give a good deal to be dense again.

So I simply shrugged my shoulders.

“And that you of all people should have tried to keep two fond hearts apart!” she burst out exasperated, “always following like a little dog—Sophonisba said so, breaking a poor girl’s heart because of a tiresome prejudice. As if half a million is within hailing sight twice in a lifetime, let alone within reach! And you trying to snatch it out of her very grasp—her own husband! Have you no romance, no sentiment left? You had so much once, but of course you weren’t married then, and that does make a difference. Surely

if you won't help, you need not hinder, and you really must give up carrying on with that widow-person—if she is a widow. So often they aren't."

I was disgusted that Pansy should have the vulgarity to suppose, and say, that I was what she called "carrying on" with Mrs. Harrip. Some people always misunderstand friendship between two members of the opposite sex, and Pansy, it appeared, was one of them. I had no intentions of giving up my pleasant friendship with Mrs. Harrip. She was my only solace in a time of sore trouble. Neither would I have doubts cast upon her and her widowhood.

"There is nothing in it, and of course she is a widow," I said with some heat, "and a most charming and unselfish woman."

"Don't be silly, Edward! As if men at your time of life waste their time like that. *All* flirtations get magnified into worse, so there may as well be something in it. She has all the virtues, save an authentic husband, living or dead. I expect hers is alive and impossible. *All* wives ought to stay with their own husbands."

"Even if drunkards, vicious, brutal?"

"There's got to be something," she returned impatiently, "*all* men have something tiresome about them when you've married them, or they wouldn't be men—always excepting James of course, but then James and I have always been different, thank goodness! Stupidity is worse than all the things you have mentioned put together, and much more common. The stupid are born and live and die stupid, and never have any 'off' times, but the drunkard is sober now and then, and one has to make excuses in matrimony, and give and take." She spoke with the more decision as she had to do neither.

“Excuses for other peoples’ husbands, and give and take in connection with other peoples’ husbands,” I retorted, “it is rather an easy philosophy, Pansy.”

Pansy stared. “Oh Edward don’t be so absurd. I see what it is. That woman has been putting ideas into your head. You never had them before. How dreadful for poor dear Sophonisba !” She was all sympathy for Sophonisba tied to her stupid husband when all she wanted was the cool young man. She hardly seemed to take my feelings into consideration.

“Surely even I may be pardoned an idea now and then,” I returned stiffly.

“Not the wrong sort of idea, Edward. Good gracious if here isn’t the woman coming after you as bold as brass—and in the daylight too ! How fortunate that I am here !”

I did not agree with her.

Before I could introduce them—I knew I should be expected to do this—Pansy amazed me by rushing at the widow, grasping her hand, and smiling very hard into her face.

“How delightful,” she exclaimed, “I have heard so much of you and have always longed to meet you ! Forgive me being personal, but people have spoken so much of your charming manners and appearance, that I knew who you were the moment I saw you. I *am* pleased !”

I could only stare. The ways of all women are beyond me, and none more so than Pansy’s.

“I have always hoped to meet you at the entertainments I manage to come down for, but I have never succeeded so far. This is better, isn’t it ? Edward, why don’t you ask Mrs. Gardeiner to come round the garden with us ?”

If Pansy had tried she could not have made a more

unfortunate mistake than this. I do not like to speak unpleasantly of Mrs. Gardeiner, but I cannot say she is the sort of woman one could admire or respect. They say of her that she emerged from the gutter to grace the back row of the chorus, and that she disgraced even that. About that I know nothing, I only know that she has an unpleasant face thick with red and white stuff, and that her golden hair is somehow horrible. Her manners and morals are considered horrible too. Nobody calls on her, or invites her to anything. Mrs. Harrip had herself expressed horror at her appearance and ways, and her own rooted aversion to meeting her on any pretence whatever, for Gardeiner,—a fast unpleasant boycotted person, had tried to become acquainted with Mrs. Harrip, and had suggested that his wife should call, and Mrs. Harrip had had to give orders to say the woman was not to be admitted or the husband either. I thought this error would cause her to take a great dislike to Pansy, perhaps show her anger, but she did nothing of the sort.

She laughed, and said quite gaily, “ You flatter me ! I never had any talent for shining in public, or indeed anywhere, I’m afraid. I am just one of your foolish simple domestic women, rather a bore, alas ! ”

“ Oh no, no ! ” I got out stuttering.

“ I am sure you underestimate yourself,” returned Pansy, trying I could see, to make the best of rather a bad business.

Mrs. Harrip turned to me, “ You are both so kind,” she sighed, “ Why should you bother about a new-comer whom Fate has left alone ? ” She cast down her fine black eyes, looking very sad, I thought. I am always sorry for her—she makes one feel like that—but I had never felt sorrier in my life.

“ I cannot but feel there must be compensation in

store for one whom Fate has treated so hardly," I said earnestly.

Then I turned to Pansy, "This lady is Mrs. Harrip," I said, "You must have heard me mention her?"

"I hear you mention so many—I mean of course I have, Edward." She smiled at Mrs. Harrip, "How stupid of me, it might have proved such an unfortunate mistake!"

"Might it?" asked Mrs. Harrip opening her eyes quite wide, "I never thought of that. I never misunderstood you for a moment. I know of course who you must be, and am delighted to meet you—the Mrs. Delland who brought my kind friend up, when he was a teeny little baby, and you were——" She paused abruptly, adding "He has often spoken of what a very trying time——you must have found it. But of course I do not believe that really. The child is father to the man, and even all those years ago——"

"He wasn't a baby," interrupted Pansy, "he was ten, I was twenty. There is barely ten years between us."

Mrs. Harrip looked so astonished to hear this that I could not but feel flattered to think she had taken me for much younger than I really was.

"So——so much!" she exclaimed, "You amaze me!"

"I'm sure to look at her nobody would take Pansy for——" I was beginning, anxious to cast oil upon the troubled waters.

But Pansy, her face like fire, stopped me, "I'm not!" she said instantly.

"But——"

"And you needn't flatter me, Edward. Doubtless there are others who can swallow such stuff in large doses, and then ask for more. I have never been one of them."

Then she turned to Mrs. Harrip, "It's a great pleasure to have met you," she said, "And even more pleasant to find you exactly what I expected, for my sister-in-law has often spoken of you. I hope we shall see a great deal of each other. I often run down, just to give the dear children—as I call them in joke—a pleasant surprise. Don't I, Edward!"

"Yes, you are always taking us by surprise, Pansy," I murmured miserably, "We had not really expected you to-day."

"I feel as if I had dropped right into the heart of an idyl at Moss End," said Mrs. Harrip to us both.

I thought of all who had dropped into the idyl—Sophonisba's uncle, bringing in his train the cool young man, and Pansy who only dropped out preparatory to once more dropping in.

"An idyl where it is always the unexpected that happens," I said heavily.

"Then the unexpected should not always happen at the wrong moment, should it Mrs. Delland?" asked Mrs. Harrip laughing. She turned to go.

"Oh but *you* are never the unexpected," I protested eagerly, "Don't go! Do come round the garden!" I spoke almost imploringly. I did not want to be left alone with Pansy.

"On some more auspicious occasion perhaps, Mr. Delland," said Mrs. Harrip, "Good-bye Mrs. Delland—or is it *au revoir*?" And with a gay wave of her hand she had gone.

"All men get it badly sooner or later," burst out Pansy, "but I never thought you would get it as late as this, Edward, or as badly."

"Get what?" I asked astonished, though I should have been accustomed to Pansy's inconsequence ere this, "Isn't she beautiful and charming?"

Pansy gulped and choked, but she found words at last ; she always does, I regret to say.

“ So there’s nothing in it ! ” she cried scornfully, “ Quite so, Edward ! I perfectly understand the situation, don’t think I’m blinded, for I’m not. It’s exactly what I feared—only worse. ‘ Compensation,’ indeed ! A nice name to call it ! Of all the shameless hussies——”

“ I will not allow you to call my friend names,” I said sternly, “ And I thought you had taken to each other. You seemed very friendly.”

“ Thinking has never been your strong point ! What do you say the creature’s name is—if it is her name ? Possibly it isn’t. It so often isn’t. Harrod ? Anything to do with the Stores ? Can she get her things at cost price ? Do her friends get any advantage ? ”

“ Her name is Harrip—not Harrod.”

“ How extraordinary—and how fortunate ! I am almost sure that is the name of the people my brother’s wife used to be so friendly with, till she found her Mrs. Harrip rather too much of a good thing. She often used to speak of them in her letters at one time, though not lately. But of course she must know. Does this Mrs. Harrip come from Manchester ? ”

“ I do not know.”

“ Where does she come from ? ”

“ She has never said.”

“ That’s suspicious, very suspicious. *All* women who won’t say where they’ve come from, have come from a place they’ve made too hot to hold them. That must be it. I am going to stay with Maisie next month, and I will find out about this adventuress. What Maisie doesn’t know, isn’t worth knowing.”

I had heard that Mrs. Morris usually knew much more than the people concerned themselves, especially

when it was anything to their discredit. Nobody could however invent anything to the discredit of Mrs. Harrip. Of that at least I was certain.

"Is it a crime to lose one's husband?" I asked.

"Don't snort, Edward. It depends on how one loses him, and if one wants to. Then it's entirely discreditable."

"In that case the death of a husband means ruin to a wife's reputation."

"Don't be silly, Edward. How you can! If he's dead of course it's sad—or should be. But what if he isn't dead? Answer me that if you can."

"Well then he isn't," I said wearily.

"I never knew a man so weak in argument, and *all* men are weak in argument. There's no sense in your answer. I'm sure Mr. Harrip isn't dead whatever his wife may say and pretend, but just on the West Coast of Africa——"

"Impossible!" I interrupted with heat.

"Oh of course you want him to be dead, Edward, I quite understand that. *All* husbands want other husbands to be dead. Then there's nobody to pop up at the wrong time, or ask questions. For of course he thinks he can choke his own wife off somehow or other. *All*——"

I said something—no matter what. I felt that if I had to hear another of Pansy's ridiculous drastic and quite inaccurate statements delivered in a tone that left nothing to argument, I should go mad. And so I said it.

"So she's teaching you that too, Edward!"

I fired up again.

"*All* husbands think they are going to throw dust in their wives' eyes. It's what some get married for. But about Mrs. Harrip. Maisie said he had business

interests in Africa, and used to be away for two years, and then home for a year regularly as clock-work. She said he had a flighty wife and no children. She was extravagant too, and he never gave her any ready money, only paid her bills—though he was quite well off. When he went away he had two maiden sisters of his to stay in the house with her and keep their eyes on her—which shows you what she was ! ”

“ Rather it shows what he was,” I said disgusted, “ A mean suspicious brute, unworthy to have a wife at all, let alone a wife like Mrs. Harrip, who it could never be. She is one of the noblest——”

“ How you rave. Edward ! Don’t you see even now ? He’s away and she’s escaped from the sisters-in-law——”

I could only admire, and envy, anyone so constituted.

“ Sometimes it is the only thing to be done,” I observed grimly, “ if only one could do it.” I sighed a little. I had never been able to do it.

Pansy gave a little jump and reddened slightly, “ that of course depends upon the sister-in-law,” she said.

“ It does.”

“ Well, as if that’s not bad enough, what about the money she is spending so recklessly ? How has she got it ? How do you know she hasn’t stolen it or forged her husband’s name or something, perhaps hoping he wouldn’t live to come back, the climate being so bad ? Oh, Edward, that you should come to consort with forgers and run-aways ! ”

“ This is outrageous ! You must be mad to make such a suggestion ! Have you never heard of the law of libel ? ”

“ All laws are silly, but the libel-law is the silliest,

why there's no sense in it at all ! I keep remembering little bits about Mrs. Harrip. Her husband was jealous, and not without cause, mind you. She was always flirting with someone or other, a married man for choice because that annoyed his wife as well as her own husband, and that type is never happy unless she is annoying someone. She would try and make a regular fool of him—she usually took up the foolish kind—and when she had succeeded, she would laugh and start on somebody else. She didn't care what trouble she took to get him into her clutches either, no trouble was too much for her. Edward, be warned in time ! ”

I proceeded to walk away without replying.

Pansy followed, “ Why are you going away ? ”

“ Because I will not hear such things said of any woman, least of all of Mrs. Harrip,” I retorted, walking faster.

“ Very well then, time will show who's right. I will write when I have seen Maisie and found out everything ; then we shall see. I can wait till then. Do you know anywhere we could go this August ? ”

“ Why not go abroad for a change ? ” I asked, perhaps a little too eagerly.

“ Because when one goes abroad what does one find ? ”

“ A thorough change of scene,” I enthused.

“ One finds people who can't speak English, and besides *all* foreigners are nasty. If they aren't nasty in one way, they are in another, and not fit to be associated with. I shall certainly not go abroad and perhaps have to meet foreigners coming up and down hotel stairs. Great Britain is good enough for me. It is clean and it is moral.”

“ Is it ? ” I said, and wondered. “ Clean, yes, but

moral? On the surface almost aggressively moral, but below the surface—what? After all, cases creep into the papers now and then which make one wonder, specially when one suspects that more is suppressed than printed.”

Pansy stared at me in horror, “You are trying to be as silly and perverse as possible, or else it is that creature’s influence? She has already undermined your sense of decency, and I don’t wonder——”

This time I walked away in earnest, literally boiling. I did not believe my Mrs. Harrip was Maisie Morris’ Mrs. Harrip at all, but if she was, everything was the husband’s fault, and Mrs. Harrip was in no way to blame. It was tragic to think of her married to such a brute, and I would not think of it.

Percy met me outside my own gate and slipped his arm in mine, “The old gal gone?” he asked confidently, “What a life your unhappy brother must lead!”

I disengaged my arm, “I have never heard that my unhappy brother has regretted his fate,” I said formally.

Percy whistled, and remarked with easy philosophy, “Ah well it takes all sorts to make a world, and there’s bound to be some mighty rum ’uns in it.”

CHAPTER XXIV

A SECRET INTERMENT BY NIGHT

WHEN painful things are always happening, and life itself is a nightmare, it might be supposed one painful thing more or less would not matter, but somehow it matters all the more.

If this special incident was painful in itself, it was even more so in it's consequences, which were many. But for the consequences and the revelation it meant, I should have preferred—very much preferred not to mention it at all.

I was standing in the garden alone by moonlight, which somehow isn't as entrancing as the other sort of moonlight, only too miserably aware that inside the house Sophonisba and the cool young man were sitting happily together hoping there would be no interruption. Satan had been with me, then even he had deserted me. I wished I had never been born. What was the use of it ?

Then I heard Satan scampering towards me, and felt a little less alone. He flew towards me carrying something. He laid it down at my feet, gave a proud bark, and proceeded to wag himself into circles and half circles. But for once I had no attention to spare for Satan and his well-meant effort to cheer me up.

I would not look at his present, and when he tugged

indignantly at my trousers begging me to take notice, I looked towards the house instead—the house that once had been mine. Now the cool young man and Percy Kearness shared it between them.

As I looked the front door opened and Sophonisba came down the steps towards me. To my astonishment she was alone. I watched her advance, but my spirits hardly lifted. I could only think how different it would once have been.

“ Oh, so you’re alone for once, are you ? ” she demanded looking sharply round, “ How bored you must be ! Are you goin’ to stand moon-gazin’ all night ? Not much fun in bein’ romantic alone by moonlight, I should think, You might as well come in as that, for a change. Goodness, what have you got there ! ” She pointed to the dark object lying at my feet.

I was so miserable that I became flippant, “ A present from Satan to a good boy,” I said.

“ Then why did he bring it to you, Edward ? ”

“ Why not ? ” I asked shortly, and stooped to examine it. I felt myself turn very pale. I did not somehow like the look of Satan’s present, and quite forgot that adage which says we must never look a gift-horse in the mouth. I had a presentiment he had brought me Mrs. Kearness’ second-best hat. Did she know or suspect ?

Sophonisba thrust me impatiently away, “ You are so slow ! ” she cried, as she dropped on her knees to look.

“ Is it the one with red feathers in it, the one she calls her afternoon ? ” I asked faintly.

“ No Edward it isn’t the one with red feathers in it, or the one she calls her afternoon. It’s the one called Charles.”

“ Good—” I was beginning hoarsely.

Sophonisba stopped me, "You mustn't be profane over a cat—even a cat like Charles," she commanded.

"But won't your mother suspect,?" I asked trembling.

"And it isn't Satan's fault anyway—dear little fellow!" she answered me.

"If she didn't happen to be anywhere about at the time of course there wouldn't be any evidence, would there?" I enquired anxiously.

"Mother was always so silly an' fussy about Charles, thought everythin' he did was right. So wrong with animals! He never caught a mouse in his life, always one of the leisured classes, an' he licked the cream off the milk in the pans—though mother swore he didn't, but then she would swear anythin' where Charles was concerned—an' he left others to get suspected. Satan did it all for the best. Charles was nothin' but a cumberer of the ground, an' as naughty as you made them, never did an' thin' for his livin' nor was ever really helpful."

"But—" I faltered.

"Yes, I know. He's all the mater had, an' that makes it awkward."

"Surely——" I began.

"You mean there's the poor pater? But he's only an aggravation, a husband, an' a duty an' a necessary evil, an' a parson, an' all that. Charles was a comfort an' a companion. It was always Charles she loved. However it can't be helped, an' t'anyrate there's nobody to blame. He's better go under the pear-tree too. I'll get the spade."

I laid him with Mrs. Kearness' other treasure. Satan watched, looking very knowing and interested with his head on one side.

"You haven't got them very far down," said

Sophonisba, "however I suppose it's all right. I may as well go in an' have some cocoa. It's gettin' chilly."

She returned to the cool young man, and I patted down the ground with all my available energy.

I had nearly finished when I found Percy watching me. I do not deny I started guiltily. My nerves have been going to pieces for some time. Soon I shall be an incurable wreck. Then Sophonisba will be free at last.

"Ha!" said Percy, and struck an attitude, "The hated rival! Done him in at last! Congrats, old man, I can always admire grit when I see it. But pat him well down, man, pat him well down, these ruthless breakers up of the innocent domestic hearth take some flattening, I assure you!"

I did not correct Percy's absurd mistake—if it was a mistake. I would not have minded just then if it hadn't been a mistake after all.

The next day my real troubles began, and the consequences hurried after me and caught me up—as consequences always do.

First of all I met the admiral.

"A fine moonlight night last night, he began, and started humming significantly, "I buried her darkly by the dead of night."

I tried to get past. I know my face was scarlet, but when it comes to manœuvres, it is always the admiral who wins. As a matter of fact it was his genius as a manœuvrer which gained him his K.C.B.

He won this time.

"I suppose you've heard Pottle's new baby and ninth daughter, has mysteriously disappeared?" he began.

I started, "Surely not!" I gasped, "How awful! How extraordinary!"

"Perhaps extraordinary," he granted, "I don't know about the awful. After all, some might say nine was one too many, and times are bad. He can't provide for them all, can't hope to marry them all, and can't hope, him being what he is, that they will have brains. Seeing that the job of Politician is not yet open to women, how are they to earn a living? It might have been worse, but of course it's making an awful lot of talk. Who's got it, that's the question. As soon as she heard, the suffragette-Miss Timons said, "that just shows you! One ought to tax bachelors—"

"When did it happen?" I asked, despairing of getting a word in edgeways.

"Oddly enough, it happened yesterday. In the evening. Rum go altogether. Everybody in an awful fuss, even the present Mrs. Pottle—except of course Pottle himself. Don't you worry that he'll come poking round at Moss End asking inconvenient questions——"

"What would he come there for?"

"To get inconvenient answers perhaps. One never knows. He's a politician, isn't he? It's not etiquette to speak the truth in their presence, simply can't be done. So that's all right. You haven't seen the kid, wouldn't know it if you did. To you it would be the same as any other kid of a few days old. You wouldn't even know it belonged to a great political family. Oh you needn't worry."

"I'm not," I said, surprised at his manner, "Why should I? though of course I'm sorry for Pottle."

"Oh I wouldn't waste my sympathy. He's bearing up wonderfully, wonderfully. Did the second hole in two to-day, by a fluke of course, though he says it wasn't, and is awfully bucked about it, and can't talk of anything else. It's quite cheered him up. When

he heard it was another girl he rushed out of the house with his gun to shoot the doctor, but thought of his constituency, and didn't. The doctor told me himself he wasn't going to undertake the next case. He said the monotony was so bad for his practice. Oh he won't have been nosing round Moss End by moonlight last night. Don't you worry."

Then I saw what he meant me to think were his thoughts.

"He can go where he damn pleases!" I exploded.

"So he will in time, my dear fellow, all politicians do, though whether he'll be pleased about it is a different matter. That's his funeral, as the Americans say. Farmer Herd has lost his valuable Jersey cow. Oddly enough she also died last night."

"Have they taken out a summons against me yet?" I asked sardonically.

"What! The cow as well?"

"I have never seen the cow to my knowledge," I said bitterly, "but for all I know the unhappy beast may have caught sight of me. In any case I presume I shall be blamed. It's of no consequence."

"My dear chap, keep calm, keep calm. I tell you you are in no danger. What I have seen I can be trusted, as usual, to keep to myself."

This remark took my breath away. He is known as a walking newspaper, a scurrilous rag, the yellowest of the yellow press.

"People say it's the work of militant suffragettes, and one red herring drawn across the trail is as good as another," went on the admiral, "I saw a person answering to such a description hovering round the bundle of the new baby, myself. Pottle says, if she's got it serve her right. Perhaps she'll stay at home and look after it, and be too tired to smash things in the

daytime. He says he knows himself what young babies are. The idea is, that the woman saw a baby with a bald head and red face, and was at once struck with it's speaking likeness to Pottle, who is awfully against Votes for Women. She did it to annoy him. The joke is, Pottle isn't in the least annoyed. He actually said to me himself, ' Well, there's one of 'em provided for ! ' ”

“ He ought to be ashamed of himself,” I burst out, “ A baby-daughter and not off his head——”

“ But he was——”

“ With delight.”

“ Perhaps he thinks one can have too much of a good thing, and that it's coming too near hustling and heckling for his fancy. You never can tell what a politician thinks, because he always says something different. I daresay he may once have told the present Mrs. Pottle that he liked her—a politician will say anything. Their consciences are made of rubber—red rubber. But don't look so down in the mouth. Mum's the word. What I happen to see I keep to myself.”

“ You happen to see rather an——an infernal lot ! ” I stammered wrathfully. I wasn't going to tell him it was Charles he had seen me bury through his telescope, because then he would be bound to meet Mrs. Kearness almost at once, and I couldn't bear the thought of her knowing, poor woman. I do not think a man should upset his mother-in-law if he can help it. When Mrs. Kearness was upset, she was very much so.

The admiral laughed. He seemed flattered rather than offended.

“ Yes, sir, you've hit it. Intelligence is the salt of life, and I'm a regular old salt you know. Ha, ha ! ”

I felt nauseated. I can bear most things,—I have to,—but it is always too much when the humourless make pointless jokes and puns, and then regret your lack of humour.

He looked at me pityingly now, “Ah well,” he said, “humour is a gift, you can’t learn it.”

“I don’t want to, thanks,” I snapped.

“Yes intelligence,” he continued as if I had not spoken, “taking an intelligent interest in one’s neighbours—the silly fools!”

I tried to dodge. He outflanked me. Never would an enemy have got past while the admiral was at sea blocking the way. It seemed a pity he was not still protecting his country.

“You do not believe me?” he accused. “I can prove it, Delland, I can prove it! These last few days for instance——”

“I beg you will not trouble, I am ready to accept your word,” I cried imploringly.

If he heard, he did not heed. “Yes, only just the last few days. The Pottle affair now. Car rushing off for the doctor in the night. Doctor rushing up the steps. Pottle rushing out with a gun. Deduction! Another-girl-dammit. Correct. Mysterious disappearance. Moonlight burial same night. Grand finale to *l’affaire Pottle*, as the French say when they want to be shocking. Then——”

I thought I had him, but it proved that it was he who had me—by the button of my coat, this time.

“Then Mrs. Gardeiner——”

“I don’t want to hear! I won’t listen!” I cried. I felt sure he wanted to tell me something quite frightful about Mrs. Gardeiner.

“Pooh! Pooh! Nothing of that sort, she’s too darned cautious, confound her! She had a crate,

or whatever you call 'em, of new hats down from London on appro. Tries 'em all on before her glass, frontways, backways, sideways. Goes out in new hats morning, noon, and eve for two days. Returns crate, 'nothing suitable.' "

"Really," I murmured feebly.

"Pass Mrs. Gardeiner. Next the third Miss Timons. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, she meets the new curate seven times. Wherever he went, whatever he did, she met him. On Thursday he lay down behind a hedge when he saw her coming. She poked her umbrella through at him. On Friday he resigned owing to urgent private affairs over which he had no control. On Saturday he went. The end of the third Miss Timons."

I wished that it was the end of the admiral's recitation. He never loses his breath. It is his listeners who do that.

"Now we come to the grass-widow——"

"We do nothing of the sort," I asserted furiously.

He took no notice, "During the week your grass-widow has 'happened' across you nineteen times, and you have happened nineteen times across your grass-widow. So far, so good. Your wife and her sister have taken the prize for picnics and motor runs, but so far nothing definite has come of it. At the same time his resisting powers are getting weakened. Your dog had been chased off other peoples' premises at least once a day. Your gooseberries are rapidly getting depleted. I am now dwelling on home affairs to show you that when I say I know a thing, I do know it. Your pretty maid Jane walks out in your wife's best hat, but no longer with the Bown's butler. She goes off to Hill Town by train. Hill Town is beyond the range, but I happen to know she meets a certain

gentleman there, and has a fine game. He pays for it on borrowed money, though she has two hundred pounds saved. Her uncle, the publican down Pimlico way, is in bad health, and she means to be his heiress. On Sunday your boys fell into the manure heap so that they were unhappily prevented going to church. Your wife was unhappily prevented too ; the weather was so fine. During the week, your wife's uncle has twice been to Hill Town, at other times he has laid down after every meal, and when he is up, he has sought you in conversation, and you have sought your gardener. I mention what I should otherwise, regard as private and sacred, my dear fellow, just to prove my argument that intelligence can go far."

"I hardly believe that mere intelligence can go as far as that," I said very coldly indeed, for I was more than horrified and disgusted, and thought with almost demoniacal fury of his infernal instrument. A fiendish desire to smash it came over me.

"Intelligence, sir," he said loftily, "accompanied by logical deduction, can do anything."

I could only feel thankful for that his "logical deduction" had not happened to be trained on Charles at a critical moment of his career.

He shattered thankfulness, rudely, by saying :

"And Mrs. Kearness has suffered a family bereavement of some sort. Not the parson. It's somebody or something she is really upset about. By Gad ! Talk of the devil—I beg your pardon, I quite forgot she was your mother-in-law, but here she is anyway, and looking rather——"

At a moment when I should have been glad enough of his company, he fled hurriedly.

Then Mrs. Kearness was upon me, tearful and distracted.

“ Oh, Edward,” she got out, “ I’m in such a way ! ”
I could see she was.

“ Have you seen Charles ? ”

“ I, Mrs. Kearness ? ” I replied trembling, “ Oh *no* ! ”

“ But you are so . . . ! And you always hated cats ! ”

“ I, Mrs. Kearness ? ” I said again, “ Oh *no* ! ”

“ But why do you——”

“ Excuse me ” I burst out, “ but here’s Pottle ! I have something special to say to him ! ”

I fled wildly, and grasped the hand of the advancing Pottle who stared at me in some surprise. Then his face cleared.

“ Then you have heard ? ” he said.

“ Oh yes,” I began.

“ Not a thing that happens to many chaps, eh ? ”

“ It’s all a mistake. I don’t believe a word of it ! ”
I assured him.

His face went dark and he drew himself up, “ I am not in the habit of lying, sir.”

“ But you represent us in the House,” I said stupidly.

“ That is begging the question. What one says in the House and what one says out of it, are entirely different matters, though as far as that goes, I don’t deny I might have mentioned it to anybody I saw. After all, a fellow might be excused being a bit bucked about a thing like that. I wish it would happen again, that’s all.”

“ But the next is three,” I gasped.

“ That’s so, but three, or five, or nine, what’s the odds,—as long as it’s done. I tell you I did it, and I can prove it. Heaps of fellows were on the links, and saw it with their own beastly envious eyes.”

“ I—I was talking about the—the other matter——your sad loss,” I stammered, “ the——the b-b-baby. I s-s-swear I’ve never s-s-seen it ! ”

“ Oh *that* ! ” he said, “ And what’s more, I won the match from the admiral with four up and three to play. What d’yer say to that ? ”

I didn’t know what to say to it, so I passed on.

That night, after I had met Mrs. Harrip, and seen her home and exchanged a few words at her gate, I returned home to find no signs of Sophonisba. The cool young man was also missing. I knew of course they were somewhere in the moonlit garden thinking of the might-have-been, and the must-be, and rushed miserably down the road not caring what became of me, and only longing to have something on which to work off my feelings.

As I was passing the admiral’s house, I noticed a light in the tower where he kept his telescope and night glasses. It was the last straw. I rushed up his drive intent on destruction.

That he should at that moment be looking down upon Sophonisba, and drawing his horrible logical deductions, was more than I could endure.

Seeing that everybody was,—or should have been,—in bed, he would inevitably be up. He did everything by “ bells,” and Sophonisba said his wife had died of it. You were never really up, or really in bed. He lived on a system of four hours off and four hours on, or something of that sort. I do not pretend to understand. I don’t know that I want to. What I already understood about the admiral and his ways was more than enough.

I tore at the bell. The sailor-servant, who keeps the same hours as the admiral—and all his old clothes—would be up.

He was, but seemed astonished—even shocked—at my being so.

“ I am going up to see the admiral about a private

matter," I said firmly, "I know my way, you need not announce me."

"He's in the tower-room, looking at the stars, sir. He does not like to be disturbed in his astronomical observations, sir. It puts him out somethink awful."

I thought how his astronomical observations put other people out. I did not point out that the night was starless. I thrust the man aside, and tore up the stairs.

The admiral looked very startled when I burst in upon him, and tried to swing his telescope away from Moss End garden, but I was too quick for him.

I seized it and flung it through the window, and it fell with a terrible crash on the stones below. "That for your logical deduction!" I cried.

"Good God, sir," cried the admiral, "Can't a man look at the stars?"

I made no answer—in words. I believe he thought I was going to throw him after his infernal implement, and I rather thought so too. At anyrate he rushed past me—skilful manœuvrer as ever—and in the distance I heard a door locked and banged.

"*Finis l'affaire l'admiral*," I murmured grimly, "as the French say when they want to be shocking." Then feeling better I went home.

I found Sophonisba in bed and asleep. It was almost as if she was pretending she had been there all the time. She woke as I came in.

"Why bother to come home at all, Edward?" she asked, "Surely even you can see that it's becoming superfluous." And she drew the sheet over her face.

I returned to my dressing-room. Like the admiral I also banged and locked the door behind me.

CHAPTER XXV

A HARVEST OF "GOOD IMPRESSIONS"

"PANSY is in Manchester," said Sophonisba to me in her changed cross tones, "so I suppose we had better get through with our beastly annual garden-party."

The idea did not appeal to me. I was in no mood for festivities, and said something of the sort. I also reminded Sophonisba of our last annual garden-party, and the disasters that had overtaken us then and since, and added gloomily, "He is still with us."

"Thanks to you for bringin' him back!" my wife retorted sharply. "Why make Angus take the sort of oath people are afraid to break because of superstition an' all that?"

"Something will be sure to go wrong if we give this party," I objected, "I have a presentiment about it, Sophonisba."

"Too much has been goin' wrong, an' too many," she returned, "an' I don't want to hear anythin' about your silly old presentiment, Edward!"

"Very well," I said shortly.

She drummed impatiently on the table. "It's got to be. There are bad impressions to be removed. That's one reason."

"And the other, if I may be permitted to know?" I asked suspiciously.

"Just so that you can make objections, Edward?"

Well if you must know, it's Ernest. Things have been goin' on in this half-an'-half way for too long, an' I want to get somethin' definite settled. I want it to be as noticeable as possible, so as to get a proper clincher put upon it at last. There's nothin' like public opinion for givin' people a push. It often lands 'em."

" And I am to——"

" You needn't shout. I'm not deaf. Kathleen is to have a new dress—hang the expense! Poor girl if only she hadn't brains she'd have gone off long ago."

" Gone off where ? " I asked. I was wondering what on earth Kathleen had to do with the garden-party, but Sophonisba is always drawing a red-herring across the trail these days.

She looked at me angrily, " Please don't try an' be funny, Edward, 'specially at this time of the mornin'. It makes me feel quite ill."

I must own that she looked it. At the same time it was useless to remark that being funny was the last thing I thought of. I was not even capable of it. I was too sick at heart. I returned to the bone of contention—the garden-party.

" But—" I began.

" You might have a new suit. One of those smart light greys that are all the fashion. Your others are pretty shabby, an' you know you've hankered after gettin' in first with somethin' really nice."

I do not really care for new or smart clothes. I wear them,—or used to,—to please Sophonisba. There was a time when she seemed to like her husband to make a good impression.

" It doesn't matter what I look like." I said wearily, " Who were you thinking of asking ? "

" Oh everybody of course. Even that Mr. Pottle, though that last baby-daughter, an' losin' her like that,

is jolly well puttin' him in the cart as far as his Constituency is concerned. Naturally they don't like it, an' they're gettin' nervous. They say the new opposition candidate is goin' to use the facts for all they are worth at the general election. Oh Mr. Pottle is in the soup all right. The other man will pull it off."

"But I don't see why!" I gasped in amazement. Pottle's seat is considered the safest in the country.

"You never see anythin', Edward. If one puts up nine unmarried sons, an' the eldest only just twenty so they'll last for years, an' the other nine unmarried daughters to be loaded off on to the Constituency, I know who'll carry my money. They'll make it a regular party question. They are all so like their father, poor things. If he brings out that eldest girl at the election as he threatens, people will see that it's the thin edge of the wedge, an' take warnin'. Still, as the election isn't comin' off just now, we'll ask him same as usual. I'll make a list."

She did so, handing it to me for my approval.

I crossed off one name—the admiral's—and substituted another—Mrs. Harrip's. She had forgotten Mrs. Harrip.

"I do not see the improvement," she said banging it down on the table, "Mrs. Harrip won't help towards a good impression. I want you to be a good host, if you are otherwise occupied all the time, our last state will be worse than our first,—that's all."

Sophonisba was to put a public "clinch" on it with the cool young man, but I was to be outside the picture, friendless and alone. I did not see it, and said so with some emphasis. I said if Mrs. Harrip wasn't there I shouldn't be there either.

"What next! Oh very well! But why cross out the telescopin' admiral? He can come in his 'four

bells ’ or whatever it is, an’ he can’t bring his beastly telescope.”

“ No,” I agreed grimly, “ he certainly can’t bring his beastly telescope, Sophonisba.”

“ An’ he’ll only have his own eyes which can’t see double owin’ to things goin’ wrong with them at the critical moment.”

I knew of course he would not come.

Just then Percy strolled in, having overheard some of the conversation, it seems. It is rather a way of his. “ At it again,” he exclaimed laughing in his discordant mirthless fashion, “ What a couple of love-birds you are ! Makes a poor forlorn old bach. feel thank—feel out of it. Why isn’t the admiral to come ? I like the old buster. Got some spicy yarns, and always knows what’s going on about the place.”

“ I don’t happen to like him,” I said coldly, “ and I don’t wish him to come to Moss End.”

Percy dropped into a seat by me, “ By Jove, old son, you’ll be saying you don’t like poor old Percy at Moss End next, or poor old bungling Bung, either ! ” He roared with laughter.

“ My likes or dislikes are of no moment in this household,” I returned, rising to leave the room.

“ Well they hold good enough elsewhere, don’t they, old chap, and hang it all a man can’t expect his will to be law in both his establishments ! ”

So of course we had the garden-party, and everybody who was—or wasn’t—anybody, for miles round.

Percy dressed before me in the new grey suit. I can—and do—lock things up, but he is far better at finding the keys than I am at hiding them, consequently I was a little late, and Sophonisba came flying to my door telling me to hurry up, that the people would arrive before I was ready.

"Percy can take my place, he seems rather good at it," I returned, "and there is always the cool young man to play host."

"Oh Edward, why sulk? You should have found a new place for the key, an' it can't be helped now. Your old suit is far more becomin'. She—people will admire you just as much in it."

"I do not expect to be admired, Sophonisba," I returned very coldly, "that is the prerogative of animated lamp-posts, and exceedingly fat little men in grey suits."

"Now Edward, it's no good goin' on like this. You simply must come down, the bishop may be here any moment, and suppose he starts lookin' down his awful nose at me."

"Why should he?" I asked.

"Because he's a bishop," returned Sophonisba, "an' stayin' with the poor pater."

It seemed no reason to me, and I said something of the sort.

"I'm almost sure the admiral is comin' up the drive," she went on through my keyhole.

"Let him!" I said.

The admiral had accepted our invitation very graciously indeed. He said that somehow or other he would manage to do himself the very great pleasure. It would be his four hours off.

"Edward?" she rattled at the door handle.

"Oh all right—I'm coming," and I came out of the room, very conscious of my shabby appearance. I could not but feel that I should be an excellent foil to the glories of Sophonisba's uncle and the cool young man.

"You look charmin'," said Sophonisba, not bothering to look at me at all, "and it is the admiral. He's

first.” The admiral is always the first to come as he is the last to go.

He at once wrung my hand, and apologised for having his telescope smashed by me. Then he thanked me for opening his eyes to how very obsolete the pattern had become, and how limited the range. He explained that he had clung to it with his silly sentimental affection, as “ we old sea-dogs do cling to things, you know ? ”

Percy grabbed an arm, “ Of course we know,” he said with a wink, “ in every port—what ! Jack’s the boy for sentimental affinities. The more the merrier ! ”

“ Wonderful models they have on the market now,” went on the admiral to me, “ I had a catalogue yesterday——”

The cool young man seized his other arm, “ Old chap be guided by me,” he urged, “ get a sixty h.p., it’s worth it every time ! ”

“ Just my own idea,” said the admiral, “ in fact it’s on order.”

“ You will be able to scour the country in fine style,” enthused the cool young man.

“ Yes, I rather expect to do something of the sort,” owned the admiral smiling at me.

I fled in search of Mrs. Harrip, only to find her surrounded by all the men of the place. Then Sophonisba sent me to look well after the suffragette Miss Timons, and not to let her go near the house or carry matches. “ If she wants to do things to Mr. Pottle, well, it can’t be helped, Edward, and it’s a political matter, but mind if she asks for a light you are to say I allow no smokin’ on the premises.”

So when the suffragette Miss Timons led me to a secluded seat, and said she could do with a cigarette, I stayed with her till she had finished it, saw it out,

and absently pocketed the matches. She talked about the disappearance of the Pottle baby. She said that when women had the vote that sort of thing would be impossible, and added darkly, "and perhaps baby-girls too."

As I was soon to discover, nobody could think or talk of anything but a disappearance which grew daily more mysterious. The only person who seemed to take no interest was Pottle himself. He appeared long ago to have forgotten that he possessed a ninth daughter exactly like himself, but in the matter of doing the second hole in one, his memory was fresher than ever. I was sick of both subjects long before the garden-party came to a rather abrupt conclusion. There was nothing I wasn't sick of, and most of all of the good impressions we made.

Refreshments were set all round the pear-tree, one of the shadiest, most charming parts of the garden that once had been mine.

"A most salubrious spot," observed Percy to me, "almost enough to bring the dead to life."

About four o'clock there was a general rush in the direction of the pear-tree. I had never seen guests so anxious for their tea before. They simply flew for it. Above the rush an unknown voice kept shouting, "Come quickly! Oh I say come quickly!" The rush threatened to become dangerous, and I wanted to say there was enough for everybody, but didn't quite like to.

"I am here all right, old son, don't get anxious about me!" cried Percy sprinting by my side, the suit creaking with the strain as he ran. "By gad! The bishop's the winner! Trust the church every time. Poor old William is making a good second. He has thrown his wife to the wolves and saved his life. He

isn't such an ass as he looks. How busy he is to be sure—dear little fellow ! ”

My heart flew into my throat and choked me.

“ Who ? ” I managed to get out trembling.

“ Doesn't Satan find some mischief still——? ” returned Percy, “ Ask poor old William. He knows ! ”

I pushed myself through the crowd which was craning forward with anxious excited faces. They were looking at a grave which had suddenly appeared under the pear-tree. Satan was right down in it, and very busy. Only his wagging-part was visible. Sophonisba was hurrying the cool young man and Kathleen into the house. Her eyes were staring dreadfully. When I tried to follow, the crush made it impossible. Percy was just behind me, a weighty obstacle, and behind him again was the admiral and Pottle. I was also wedged between Mr. Kearness and the bishop. It was not a happy moment. I could go forward without opposition—for there was nobody in front of me—but I could not go back.

Percy dug me in the ribs, “ Got a front seat all right, dear boy ! Slap bang in the stalls ! What a queue we have behind us ! How the pittites crush ! Can't they see this is not a moment to eat oranges ! ”

I tried, hoarsely, guiltily, to call Satan off, to command him to desist. It seemed to add a fresh impetus to his exertions. The more I called, the harder he worked—and wagged.

And so there I was, wedged—and waiting. The tortures of the inquisition could have been nothing to it. And Sophonisba had got away and left me to my fate—for the first time in her life. It showed how matters had changed between us. I had nobody to help me, nobody to depend upon. I was lost—and I knew it.

All around me were pale, shocked, and expectant, faces.

“He’s found a corpse!” shrilled Percy, breaking the awful silence, “Which of you is missing? Which of you had met with a sudden end? Speak up, good people!”

Somebody giggled foolishly.

“Ah, Edward, let us hope it will prove ‘only a little one,’” he went on.

Some fool sniggered again.

Then with a mighty heave Satan came out of the grave dragging something with him.

“It’s a very dead corpse,” said Percy, and like the rest of the community put his handkerchief to his nose. I held mine.

At that moment Sophonisba came back, and pushing up against the bishop said, “Goodness! What can it be? How did it get there?”

“Ah! Who can say?” replied Percy shaking his head. “Another mysterious disappearance.”

An electric wave went through the crowd. Every eye fastened itself upon Pottle, who went on about his hole in one to the admiral, who swore it was all an optical illusion.

“I suppose it’s one of the fowls that wouldn’t lay, and Angus buried it there in a temper. Angus! Angus! Come here at once! You’re wanted!” cried Sophonisba.

“By Jove! A fowl! That accounts for it—thought I saw feathers,” said somebody, “How disgusting!”

Mrs. Kearness craned forward. “Ostrich feathers,” she screamed.

“Angus! Angus!” shouted Sophonisba.

Angus came running, a hoe in one hand, the spade in the other.

“ It’s my hat,” wailed Mrs. Kearness, “ my best hat ! ” She turned on me, and never shall I forget the outraged gleam of her eyes, “ Edward——”

“ I—I—” I began helplessly. I felt like one who had robbed a panther of her cubs. Gladly would I have been dead and buried under the pear-tree.

Then Angus rushed into our midst, and clumsily up against me, so that my shamed confession was jostled out of my mouth. He seemed to take in the whole situation in one glance.

Then he stepped forward and to my horror and amazement said :

“ I done it.”

I could not have this, though Sophonisba was pinching my arm as a sign I was to keep silent, and leave everything to Angus. “ I—” I began weakly.

“ You took my hat ? ” gasped Mrs. Kearness, “ My best hat ? How dare you ! What did you want with it ? ”

“ I didn’t want naught’m,” said Angus respectfully, “ but Dorothea, she’s fair strook on hats. She said she had to have a new one, and I said she hadn’t, that I couldn’t afford it, nor wouldn’t——” he paused.

“ You—you——” began Mrs. Kearness.

“ Yes’m, I know. Dorothea she said as how if I wouldn’t buy a hat, I must find one, and so I yielded to temptation, mum, and found one.”

“ You must be mad—mad. I don’t believe it ! What is it doing there ? ”

Angus scratched his head, and did not speak for a moment, then he said, sadly and slowly, “ Dorothea said as how it didn’t suit her, mum, and as how I was to take it away and bury it, and so’m to avoid argyment, I aburied of it.”

I gasped, opened my mouth, and Angus stuck his elbow into it, while Sophonisba said again to leave it to Angus for goodness sake, and that, after all, Mrs. Kearness was her mother and I might remember it and think of her feelings for once.

"I never heard of some impertinence! Not suit her! Stealing it! Burying it!" cried Mrs. Kearness. Then she gave a piercing shriek, craning forward, "What's that! What's that! Edward, answer me at once!"

Sophonisba clapped her hand over my mouth. I could not breathe, let alone speak.

Mrs. Kearness answered her own dreadful question, "It's Charles," she cried, "My Charles!"

"*Her* Charles," whispered Percy to me, "and poor old William standing there mum, taking it sitting down! These parsons!"

The admiral buzzed in my other ear, "Who was the chap anyway? How long has it been going on? How was it I never knew?" He spoke with almost fierce resentment.

Sophonisba's grip of me made reply impossible.

"Why it's a cat!" cried somebody, and several faces fell.

"Poor old Pottle," murmured Percy, "What a beastly shock! What a dash to his hopes!"

How on earth did it get under your pear-tree?" asked the admiral of Sophonisba.

"How should I know?" she returned sullenly.

"I thought you might be able to offer some solution, no matter how far-fetched, my dear Mrs. Delland."

To my surprise Sophonisba was silent.

Mrs. Kearness came towards me, people leaving a passage clear. I could only hear my own heart beat and Sophonisba's heavy rapid breathing.

“ Who has done this thing ? ” demanded Mrs. Kearness. “ Who has done an innocent creature to death, and sought to hide his crime under the pear-tree ? ”

I saw there was nothing for it but confession, and nerved myself for the worst. “ I assure you,” I tried to say. Sophonisba’s grip tightened. She nearly choked me. She looked expectantly, desperately, towards Angus.

He came forward.

“ I done that too,” he said laconically.

“ Then we have been deceived in you, Angus.” said Sophonisba reproachfully.

“ Yes’m.”

“ But Angus why ? How ? Didn’t you know how dear Charles was to all of us ? ”

“ I dunno how or why.” said Angus scratching his head, “ I just done it.”

“ This is abominable. I insist——”

“ With the hoe.” interrupted Angus.

“ I believe you ! ” ejaculated Percy.

“ Ay, that was how I done it—with the hoe.”

“ I done it with my little hatchet, or rather with my hoe,” murmured Percy, “ and my name is George Washington, or rather Angus Macdonald, because I cannot tell a lie.”

Angus whizzed round, glared at the speaker, and dropped his spade on his foot. Percy got further away and was silent for some time.

“ Why did you do it ? Why did you do it ? You—you murderer ! ” cried Mrs. Kearness. “ I insist upon an answer.”

“ That fair gravels me, that does ! ” I heard Angus murmur as he fell to scratching his head again.

“ Answer me at once, fellow ! ”

"Yes'm, certainly'm. Happen it was that there kiss-me again."

"You scoundrel, what are you talking about? Edward, you can stand there and let him insult me! Why don't you say something?"

I could not explain how physically impossible this was. I could only maintain my forced silence.

"I done it," burst out Angus quickly, "'cause I'd got fair desperit-like for manure'm."

"You——"

"It makes you look fair silly'm when your pear-trees don't bear no pears. Happen they'll bear next year'm. They are the best Williams in the neighbourhood when there are any of them."

"Surely now you will call them Charles rather than Williams," suggested Percy from a safe distance.

"Edward, I insist that you dismiss this man!" burst out Mrs. Kearness.

Angus touched his forehead respectfully. "Sorry'm but it can't be done," he said instantly, "long of a life-contract drawed up yesterday, and witnessed by Dorothea and me, and the master and missus, and all signed and sealed and delivered'm according to law."

"Edward you are foolish enough for anything, but I can hardly believe this!"

"Unfortunately it's true mother," said Sophonisba, "we can't get rid of the wretch however much we may want to. It's just as he says. And he made it on blue paper."

"I demand to see this document. The law can always break the laws it makes. It's what the law is for."

"We will fetch it," said Sophonisba tugging at my arm. "Where did you leave it, Angus?"

He came with us to find it. I do not think we were

long—considering, though Mrs. Kearness seemed to think so. She found the document exactly what Angus had stated.

“ Is this legal ? ” she asked my lawyer who was among the guests, and after a glance at me, he said it would hold good in any court of law, and took possession of it to put among my bonds and so on, in his safe.

Then Mrs. Kearness, quite overcome, demanded to be supported home at once. Mr. Kearness said he would take her as soon as he had had a cup of tea or something of that sort. It ended by Mrs. Kearness commanding the curate to escort her, which, after a wistful backward glance at all he was leaving behind, he did. He came back later—I am thankful to say—and made up for it.

Angus buried the contents of the grave many feet deeper and put a load of stones and bricks upon the two corpses. “ It seems rather a shame after all his trouble—dear little fellow ! ” observed Sophonisba.

Then the bishop bore down on us, and Sophonisba lost her nerve.

“ Oh, Edward, he’s comin’, he’s goin’ to begin,” she wailed, “ whatever shall I do ! ”

“ What do you mean ? ” I asked, “ Begin what ? ”

“ Oh, questions an’ everythin’. He confirmed me. Then he’s been stayin’ with the poor pater. He’ll know simply everythin’, an’ me chargin’ out in the middle. The poor pater’s bound to have consulted him on his spiritual difficulties. Then I forget what you call bishops. My Grace ? No, that’s wrong ! How silly ! But I’m all muddled, I simply don’t know what I’m sayin’, or doin’ ! Oh, Edward, why not have left well alone ? Why insist upon givin’ a beastly garden-party ? ”

I sighed in a dispirited fashion.

"Oh, he's comin'—he's come!" Her voice died away. "Isn't he awful? Oh, Edward, his nose!"

It certainly was an awe-inspiring nose, but his legs were not in the least awe-inspiring, as I managed to point out to Sophonisba. They were a very weak point indeed.

"He doesn't let you look at his legs," complained Sophonisba. "He knows nobody ever gets beyond his nose, he——"

Then she stopped for the bishop really had come up to us.

"You're not looking at all well, my dear Mrs. Delland," he said in very kind fatherly tones I thought. "You ought to take another change. Sea-Swell is a most bracing spot."

Sophonisba shuddered, threw me an agonised glance, pressed her handkerchief to her nose, and said frantically, "Excuse me, but my nose is bleedin'."

His eyes twinkled, "But it's Monday my dear lady," he said.

"That doesn't make any difference," she insisted.

"Now I was under the impression that it made all the difference in the world," he returned, "that it rested on the six days, Mrs. Delland, and worked on the seventh. Very regrettable, very regrettable, indeed."

"I was brought up in the house with him," returned Sophonisba apologetically. Then she got flurried, tried to think of the correct term of address, exclaimed "Good Lord!" with extreme violence and feeling, and fled in disorder.

The bishop roared with laughter.

When I caught up with Sophonisba, she was looking very worried, too worried even to bother about the

cool young man and his plans. He had had to put up with Kathleen for the greater part of the day, and several people had dropped hints in a fashion that I thought very bad taste. The admiral had even asked me when “ it is coming off ? ”

“ What’s the matter now ? ” I asked anxiously. “ Is there anything else to be discovered against us ? ”

‘ It’s the refreshments. People are so fussy and particular, they won’t like having it on the grave. The tables must be put at the other end of the garden.’

This was done, and I think people did prefer it so.

I was in no mood for refreshments, and like an unhappy criminal, was drawn back to the scene of my crime. I walked miserably along, not noticing or caring where I was going and I tripped over something, and into something.

When I felt myself going, I clung to the latter something to maintain my balance, then I saw it was Mrs. Harrip, and apologised, and bumped her nose, and apologised again. She said it did not matter, and very kindly helped me to maintain my balance.

Just then Sophonisba, followed by the admiral, and a few dozen of the guests, came suddenly round the bushes, and seemed very astonished to find me under the pear-tree. Percy seemed amused, and called out that I seemed to have rather a penchant for pear-trees. The cool young man whistled, and said something to Kathleen who looked quickly away again, her mouth turned down.

Sophonisba said I had better bring Mrs. Harrip to tea before it got cold, so we came, and people left me alone to talk to her. When she had gone—she went soon afterwards—the admiral linked his arm in mine.

“ That pear-tree of yours will prove a regular Waterloo, if you ain’t careful, old man,” he warned me. “ Of

course I know you were drawn to the scene of your crime by psychic force and all that—awfully drawing things these psychic forces, still—the rhododendron bushes are thicker, and less in the public line of vision. Thanks so much for asking me, I wouldn't have missed your garden-party for worlds. I have never spent such a thoroughly entertaining afternoon in my life."

"You're very welcome," said Percy before I could reply, "Come often, old fellow, and stay late. We shall be delighted!"

And the admiral thanked him, and said he would.

Then, the refreshments being finished, all the other people came and said how they had enjoyed themselves, and went.

"Well, that's over," I said, "This year we hadn't even a single refusal, Sophonisba."

"That makes it all the worse," she retorted glaring at me. "Talk of bein' up a gum-tree! Thanks to you, Edward, we're there for life!"

"I know that what happened under the pear-tree was unpleasant," I began.

"It certainly was—very unpleasant indeed."

"But Angus so generously taking the blame—surely he will accept some five pound notes now——"

"Angus has too much self-respect to take the blame for *everythin'*," she returned, "Not to mention that he has taste. Why the pear-tree of all places?"

"It seemed so convenient at the time," I murmured abjectly.

"Convenient! Really Edward! Nothin' could have been more inconvenient in every way! I say nothin' of my own feelin's. They have gone by the board long ago, an' I suppose in time one gets accustomed—— I did so want to save appearances just for once. I have always sworn by all that was holy that

there was nothin' in it, an' that it was harmless, an' platonic, an' now ! Oh bother the garden-party, Edward ! An' even Ernest didn't ! ”

She flung herself face downwards on the sofa, and asked me to go away. She said she didn't care if I never came back either.

Outside Percy fastened upon me.

“ Don't cut your throat, old chap, now don't,” he urged me. “ Don't hang yourself on the pear-tree either. I'm sure Angus wouldn't like it.”

Then he plunged into talk, both silly and offensive, on the matter of the garden-party. I was very glad to get rid of him at the price of a loan of five pounds.

He said that it was seldom he got a tailor to suit him so well, and he might as well give the Hill Town girls a treat. They seemed to lead rather dull lives, poor things. He started humming a merry and vulgar air that was just then all the rage, filling my clothes to overflowing, every button hard put to it to do its duty. I like my things made very loose, but there is a medium. What Percy has worn, could never again be worn by me. I should look like a thin boy in his stout father's suit. What I need in extra length, Percy takes up in width, and it is rather horrible to see how very well my clothes do fit him seeing how very different our figures actually are.

“ We might be twins,” he added to my annoyance ere departing, “ it doesn't seem to matter which the tailor measures. The result does perfectly for either.”

Of course there came the usual letter from Pansy a day or two later. It was post-marked Manchester.

“ Why both under the pear-tree, Edward ? ” she asked. “ It seems such a morbid idea.”

She went on to say she was enjoying herself enormously, and would have something very special to

tell me, perhaps to show me, on my return. “*All* eye-openers are good for people,” she stated. She said I must possess my soul in patience a little longer, she was not going to spoil her “coup” by premature disclosure. She concluded by, “*All* bad impressions are always remembered. *All* good impressions are always forgotten.”

I showed the letter to Sophonisba.

“There’s one mercy at least,” she said handing it back to me, “people may doubt Angus’s word an’ come to suspect you, but he at least is safe—dear little fellow!”

CHAPTER XXVI

SOME STARTLING EVENTS

IT was a few days later that Percy, looking up from my paper, observed, "According to statistics, fewer married men go mad than bachelors. I don't believe it. What do you say, Edward?"

"I don't believe it either," I snapped.

"Don't mind my feelin'," said Sophonisba looking up, "I'm only a madman's wife."

I said nothing. Too well I realised that confusion and bewilderment was rapidly yielding to acute mania. I expected to go mad almost any day. Perhaps Sophonisba would be sorry then, but it would be too late.

"So you acknowledge it," she remarked. "Don't be silly, Edward, as if people went mad for love at your age!"

"A fellow never knows what he can do till he tries," remarked Percy in his most aggravating fashion, "And I must say I have noticed a lot of rum things about poor old Edward lately. Nothing he did or took to would surprise me now, or the neighbourhood either, I believe."

He went to lie down taking my paper with him. I hardly knew what government was in, the latest scandal, how the great flying competition was getting on, or the "silly season" topic.

I sought Angus, hoping for a funny story. Instead

he began to talk of the admiral and his new telescope, a subject I was already sick of.

"If it was me, sir," he said apropos of nothing as far as I could see, "I dunno as I should go in so much for the gooseberry bushes and the pear-tree. There's shade in a rhododendron bush when it's well growed, which ours is, thanks to goodness and manure."

"They are very fine this year," I agreed without interest.

"There are always plenty o' ripe plums ready to fall all over the shop," he observed, a statement which surprised me, seeing our plums are green as yet. The chap that keeps his mouth shut and *lets* 'em fall, sir, misses the indigestion. Wonderful what a lot of trouble these here ripe plums have caused in households——"

"We're going to be more careful this time," I assured him. Last year Edward the Second and Billium had got there first.

Angus went on as if he had not heard. "And they's never worth it, sir, you mark my words, they's never worth it! I knew a chap onst what fell asleep all innercent-like under a tree, just as if it might be yourself, sir, and not your fault at all, with his mouth open, and a great fat plum with a great fat stone, fell into it and achoked him, sir. Then he was sorry that he had gone for to do it."

"I never sleep under trees, Angus," I said rather impatiently, "And never with my mouth open."

"I've heard folk don't know whether their mouths is open or not when they's asleep, sir, and even if it were but a mite open, well, maybe that plum, all along o' kiss-me, sir, would have a go at amaking trouble, being set on that way from the first, as anyone can see with half an eye."

“ And anyway the plums aren’t ripe,” I concluded. It seemed to me an unanswerable argument. Not so to Angus.

“ There’s plums in this world, sir, as is always ripe and over-ripe—bad luck to them, the hussies ! ”

“ To who—to what do you allude ? ” I demanded sternly.

“ To them as the cap fits, and it isn’t me as does the deluding, and a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, sir,” with which, greatly to my disgust, he took up his tools and departed. Later I overheard a conversation between him and Dorothea which annoyed me further.

I was wandering wistfully through the passages of Percy’s and the cool young man’s domicile, and chanced upon an altercation between husband and wife—at all times a most unfortunate occurrence—outside the housekeeper’s room. They were both very red and angry.

“ Answer me this,” thundered Angus, “ Who is master in this house—me or you ? ”

“ Me,” returned Dorothea without any doubt whatsoever, “ And I’ll thank you not to forget it—you great Gahoo you ! ”

Then my own face got red and angry, and I thrust myself forward and between them, “ Neither of you are master in this house,” I said sharply, “ I am.”

They both stared at me with their mouths open. Then Dorothea tried to suppress a giggle, and gasped “ Lor, sir ! Whoever did ! ”

Then Sophonisba overhearing appeared, and she was red and angry, too, “ Good gracious, Edward, what will you be saying next ! ” she exclaimed, “ You must be goin’ mad after all ! ”

“ I had forgotten the claims of Percy and the

cool young man, Sophonisba," I retorted with dignity.

Percy himself appeared that instant, and demanded to be told who was "taking his name in vain." He linked his arm in mine and informed me he had a story to tell me. It would make me die.

I said I did not wish to die, and must put my kind relations to further inconvenience for a year or two. His funny stories are nasty, and never funny, his tales of adventure I have heard a million times. This time it was the seven lions—there had only been one at the first recital—he had shot all at once up a tree, leaving it quite vague as to whether it was he or the lions who were up the tree. As far as I was concerned, it had become a matter of complete indifference.

It was not pleasant to think that my boys were being nourished on such travellers' tales. I could not get them to listen any longer to true stories from the great travel-histories. They thought them dull after Percy's thrilling narrative, and did not scruple to say so. He was still their idol, and slowly, surely, insidiously, doing them no end of harm. They had taken to embroidering facts on their own account, and exaggerating grossly. They said that a hundred fowls had got out, when actually only three had escaped, and talked of giving the youngest chicken a "cart-load of worms big as snakes."

When I complained to Sophonisba as to the example of her uncle, she merely said :

"Who brought him back, smugglin' him into the house when I wasn't lookin' ? Exaggeratin' isn't lyin'. Perhaps they'll grow up novelists. Then whatever they do that they shouldn't, we can say it is only the artistic temperament an' mustn't be thwarted, 'cos genius can't be trammelled."

It was all very hateful and miserable. For years life had seemed the greatest, most glorious gift, and now I wouldn't mind being dead.

I said as much to Sophonisba hoping to waken her pity, but I didn't waken it. She just gave a snort and said :

“ Perhaps you'd mind it more than you think once you found yourself There. People do, I expect.”

So I wandered away from Sophonisba and Percy, and went and stood outside my own gate, and wished I had never been born. Then the admiral—in a great state of excitement—came and found me.

“ Have you heard ? ” he began.

“ No,” I said, trying—and failing—to get inside my own gate again, “ And I don't want to.”

He took no notice, save to drive me into a little corner and keep me there. “ Man ! It's the Pottle baby ! ”

I shrank back in alarm, “ What is ? ” I asked startled. I wondered if he meant that he had it on him somewhere.

“ It's been found ! Returned ! Old chap you can hold up your head again ! Your name is cleared ! Like Brutus you are an honourable man.” He sniggered.

I made a sudden spurt, and got further wedged into my corner.

“ It was the rummest go you ever heard ! The militant-suffragette brought it back herself with her compliments, and they ran and told Pottle to rejoice, that somebody had brought it back, and he said ‘ Give me my gun ! ’ and rushed into the garden, but the woman had gone. So somebody picked up the bundle and ran after Pottle with it, and he ran into his study, but wasn't quick enough to lock the door, and they said :

“ ‘Don’t grieve any longer. The suffragette has repented and brought it back.’ He said : ‘ Damn the suffragette, damn all suffragettes ! ’ Then——”

I made another attempt at escape, and was thrust back instantly. The admiral is about four times my size, and he absolutely blocked all means of exit. I gave up hope. I had to know all about the Pottle baby.

“ You’ll never guess what he said, Delland ? ”

“ Don’t want to.”

“ He said ‘ So it kept her awake at night, did it ? Serve her right ! Have it bathed, thoroughly disinfected, and put well away.’ Then he returned to the political leader.”

I was disgusted at such heartless conduct.

“ But the point of the whole thing is to come. When they undid the bundle what d’yer think they found ? ”

He had aroused my interest and curiosity at length. “ It wasn’t the right baby ? ” I guessed, “ But would they know ? Aren’t they all the same ? It wasn’t a baby at all ? ”

“ Don’t be an ass, old fellow, and quite wrong ! It was the baby all right, but not a bald baby——” He fell against me roaring helplessly.

I felt my own head—where the hair is not as thick as I could wish—“ Had they tried an infallible hair-restorer on it ? ” I asked breathlessly. “ What’s the name of the stuff ? ”

“ Better than that, better than that ! All across the pate that had been bald, was printed in purple and green indelible ink, the magic legend ‘ Votes for Women ! ’ ”

“ Good——”

“ Pottle said more than that, a great deal more, then, finding language useless, he cried.”

“ Cried ? ” I echoed.

“Like a lusty two-year-old. The gardener heard him from the bottom of the garden. Pottle said it was the most frightful disgrace that could happen to a man of his political views and party, and would lose him his seat. He sent for the washerwoman, and asked if she would put the baby in soak, but she’s one of them herself (I think the admiral meant to imply that the washerwoman was a suffragette), and said that nothing would ever take it out, and boiling and soda only ‘fix’ it in. She said it would grow green and purple hair with ‘Votes for Women’ on it, and Pottle fainted dead off and had to be put to bed. As soon as he regained consciousness, he asked for his gun. The baby is going to be kept away from him at present for the good of his nerves, and the present Mrs. Pottle says she thinks it better to leave him quite to himself till he has got over it. You see the present Mrs. Pottle is one herself (again I think he alluded to the suffragettes), and with a wife and young baby witnessing against him, it’s a bit awkward. People are saying that she did it herself to bring him to his senses. If you’d like to come down with me to his place and hide behind the hedge, I believe I could get the present Mrs. Pottle to bring it out to show you. She counts on it doing an awful lot for the Cause. Come on !”

I declined rather hurriedly, and the admiral, having filled me with horror and amazement, rushed down the road to do the same with the rest of Hill Land. He is always the first to recount what has just happened.

Then—do misfortunes ever come singly?—a cab drew up, and Pansy, in an even greater state of excitement, leapt from it, and upon me.

“Edward,” she exclaimed, “how thankful you should be that it wasn’t you the militant abducted !”

I gasped.

“Suppose she had printed ‘Votes for Women,’ on yours!”

“I prefer not to suppose it,” I said coldly. “She required a bald surface.”

“She could have done bigger letters on yours. Is it true that Mr. Pottle has shot himself, or has he only shot the present Mrs. Pottle?”

“Possibly both, Pansy!” Pansy always knew all there was to be known, and much more. There were people I wouldn’t mind Pottle shooting, the admiral was one, Percy and the cool young man were others, and perhaps there was also Pansy.

“Of course Mr. Pottle swears he knows nothing of the abduction, but then politicians will swear anything, it’s what they do it for. *All* politicians only tell the truth when they know it’s safe to be taken as a lie, and never any other time. Ordinary people are content with telling a lie in the hope it may be taken for the truth. Let’s stroll down the road—this way?”

It seemd to me an odd thing to drive up to Moss End in haste, only to walk away from it, but then Pansy is often unaccountable. To-day there was something specially odd about her.

“*All* husbands should return unexpectedly,” she began. “Edward, he has returned unexpectedly.”

I could only stare.

“You are saved my poor boy!”

“Indeed!” I exclaimed.

“Then you saw the danger at last? I hoped you would. *All* men want their eyes opening about women.”

“Do they? Why?”

“Oh, Edward, don’t be silly! *All* men hope they are the only one, but only fools take it for granted.” She walked faster then ever. “I am indeed thankful

to get down in time to save you—and to see you saved.”

I wondered what she was talking about, but then, more often than not, I do wonder what people are talking about. The writer who said that “language was given us to conceal our thoughts,” might well have added, “and to confuse the thoughts of others.” Saved from what? A sudden glimmer of hope illumined my darkness. Was she alluding to the cool young man or Percy? Did she think she saw a way out?

“I believe he was on the same train,” she went on, and shook with the excitement she was trying to suppress, “but I got here first. He would have to walk. I took the only cab. Dear me, if that isn’t Mrs. Harrip standing by her gate—how fortunate!” She rushed across and greeted her warmly.

Mrs. Harrip asked us to come in for tea, and Pansy accepted with alacrity.

“Nothing could be better,” she murmured to me. “It was what I was hoping. Now I will be there to help you, Edward.”

In a feverish sort of way, she sat down on the one seat by the window, and began talking very fast to Mrs. Harrip, telling her all about the Pottle baby, and though Mrs. Harrip had already heard it from the admiral, she listened with equal interest to Pansy’s version which was even more odd.

When we were at tea, I thought I heard someone come up the drive and walk in at the front door as if he had a perfect right to do so, but Pansy was making such a clatter with her cup and spoon, and talking so loud and fast to Mrs. Harrip, that I could not be sure.

But when the door was flung open and a man marched in, I saw I had not been mistaken, and at once rose to expel the intruder, for I saw that his appearance

had terrified Mrs. Harrip. She had gone a very curious colour, and given a faint little shriek. Then she sat quite still saying nothing, but looking somehow rather dreadful, and staring—staring horribly. It might have been a ghost, though there was nothing ghost-like about the fellow. He was tall, broad and very brown, with hard eyes and a very hard thin mouth. I took an instant dislike to him, and I could see he had done the same to me.

“What does this unpardonable intrusion mean?” I demanded advancing upon him.

He bowed—rather ironically, I thought—“I must apologise for the intrusion,” he said, “but I am just home from Africa, and I have called to see my wife—with your kind permission.” And he bowed again, his mouth tightening.

“Your—your w-w-wife,” I stammered. “There must be some mistake.” I could not believe the evidence of my own ears, and my heart was sick with pity for Mrs. Harrip. Was it possible that she was not a widow, and that she was tied to this brute, for he was,—most unmistakeably,—a brute.

“I do not think there is any mistake, sir. Though I have not seen her for a year I still know my own wife by sight, and—I think she knows me, don’t you, Adela?” And he laughed a little.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Harrip looking up and speaking in a whisper, “Yes——John.” She twisted her pretty fingers together, and a dull crimson crept up from her throat to her forehead.

“I have good news for you, Adela,” went on the man ignoring my existence, “I have done with Africa, thanks to a lucky coup, for good and all, and have returned to keep you company, and look well after you, my dear. You will like that, will you not?”

"Yes—— John," she returned, twisting her fingers more than ever.

"You must have been very lonely all this time, I am afraid. I must thank this lady and gentleman for so kindly helping you to pass the time." He bowed to both of us, his eyes meeting mine like a flash of steel, and stood aside from the open door.

Mrs. Harrip made rather a desperate little gesture, and I found myself on the other side of a shut door, Pansy behind me. I was unspeakably disgusted that Pansy should have seen to it that we were present at an interview that was private and sacred. I saw that she had come to do this thing, and I went near to hating her.

"It would have been much more exciting on the stage," she remarked in a discontented voice. "I could have done it better myself. Nothing happened. There was a nice soft bed outside. I thought he was going to throw you through the window."

My disgust deepened, and my hatred grew.

She patted my arm, "Of course it rankles, no man likes to be made an utter fool of, by husband as well as wife, but it's all for the best. Now you will return to poor darling Sophonisba, and all will be as it used to be before that scoundrel-uncle appeared, and you will have your mind free to attend to getting rid of him. It only wants a little strength of will, dear. Nothing short of the evidence of their own eyes will convince some people. It would have been no use writing and telling you she was Maisie's Mrs. Harrip, and rather a bad lot. Her husband went abroad as usual leaving his two sisters to look after her, and she took it for granted—so silly when it's husbands!—that she was rid of him for two years. Soon after he had left, a relative left her a legacy, and she disappeared

saying she was going to visit a sick relation, and went to Sea-Swell, the sort of place those sort of widows always do go to. So you see, Edward."

"I fail to see——"

"That's what she calls them—sick relations. *You* were a sick relation, Edward."

"Don't be absurd!" I cried angrily.

"Of course you deny it—people always do. *All* men will lie like troopers rather than look silly—then they look silly just the same."

"Really, Pansy——"

"Yes, really, Edward. Mr. Harrip came home for good without letting her know, found her flown, saw me——"

"I think you mean you saw him——"

"It's the same, don't interrupt so. We saw each other. I told him what I knew. He went at once for the train, and we both caught it. She must have come nearly to an end of her legacy. He will take her back at once and she will go like a lamb because he's the only man who has any real power over her, though once she called it being in love, I suppose——"

"She cannot—— not that brute!" I exclaimed distastefully.

"How little you know of human-nature, Edward, and above all of women! It's because he is a brute of course. *All* women love brutes. You will never see her again."

Something told me—correctly as it happened—that Pansy spoke the truth, but I did not like her any the more for it. I had lost my one sincere sympathetic friend. If I had had Sophonisba it wouldn't have mattered, for Sophonisba had once been friend, as well as wife and lover, to me, but I should never have Sophonisba again. If my loss had been Mrs. Harrip's

gain I could have found it easier to endure, but I could not think that either. I sought for a change of subject, it was not a matter I could discuss with Pansy. "How is James?" I asked.

Her face lit up and she held forth on the matter of James, and how "different" he was.

Then she returned to Mrs. Harrip, and I had to seek another change of subject—and I am not gifted at this sort of thing.

I tried to think of something that would please her. She was looking very handsome in what I supposed a new hat and costume. I eyed her attentively.

"Why you have taken to the fashionable coils," I said. "They suit you, Pansy."

She turned on me as if insulted, her eyes flashing, "I haven't!" she exclaimed at once, "You are quite wrong, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Edward! It just shows what marriage does to some men. Once you would never have supposed such a thing."

"But——"

"We will talk of something else if you please," she commanded majestically, so I tried to think of something else.

"I have given Mrs. Kearness a new cat," I said, "the kind that has kittens. It is going to have them next week, prize kittens, and Mrs. Kearness is so excited she's gradually forgetting about Charles."

"You should train that dog! Disgraceful!"

"We do," I asserted, "often, Pansy."

"Oh yes—you never allow him to do anything he doesn't want to do!"

"He wouldn't—if we did allow him," I said feebly, "And he's a great comfort to us, Pansy."

"What will you say next! No woman could be

expected to forgive a best hat, and married to a man like that ! She must have married him before she had to as a forlorn hope. *All* girls should keep one in the background to fall back on in case it comes to the worst, but they shouldn't accept the worst till they know it's that or nothing. Mrs. Kearness must have accepted the worst at eighteen, just when she should have been beginning in earnest. No wonder she is a weary disillusioned woman ! ”

“ But she isn't,” I objected.

“ Don't be silly, Edward ! *All* clergymen's wives lose their illusions before anybody else, and end up in believing in nothing because of the awful example in their own household.”

Again I groaned inwardly—and sought for another subject. I had never known Pansy more full of her blatant mis-statements.

“ The boys are growing fast,” I ventured.

“ In fat ? Yes I was noticing, most unfortunate, and yet what else could one expect, poor dears.”

I was annoyed. “ There are not fat,” I said coldly, “ And they are very unusual boys in every way. Everybody says so.”

“ *All* parents think their own children unusual, and so they often are—unusually plain, or stupid, or unpleasant.”

If wishes could have slain, then Pansy would have been no more there and then. If only something unpleasant would happen to her ! But it never did. She did not permit it. She saw to it that the unpleasant happened to others. I did not try for a change of subject. I walked on glaring.

“ Don't make such faces, Edward ! You can't think how silly it makes you look. Oh here's Sophonisba ! ” She rushed up to her, flung her arms round her

neck, and began talking in a rapid half-whisper. I imagine she was detailing my delinquencies.

Sophonisba, who had been looking tired and cross, came up to me looking almost her own self again. She slipped her arm through mine, and murmured softly, "My poor dear! Has it been very awful?"

I saw she realised what a time I had been having with Pansy. "It was more than awful," I groaned, "And I wished she was at the bottom of the sea!"

"I have wished that all the time!" cried Sophonisba, her eyes dancing, "and—oh, dear, here's Pansy followin' us! How like her!"

Pansy came up smiling, and took my other arm, "It's all right," she said as if she was talking to a fractious child who sought something injurious to play with, "I don't think it's very serious after all. A blow to his vanity perhaps. *All* men's weak point is their vanity. *All*—but Good Heavens what is this? How disgusting——! I believe I am going to faint——ough!——" She sank limply on to a seat close. We were at the bottom end of the lawn.

Sophonisba and I did not answer. We were both trying not to faint.

A couple of miles away there is a bone-manure factory that won't bear talking about. Satan had been strictly forbidden to go near it. But he had been near it now—very near.

"He's rolled in it——!" gasped Pansy faintly. "It will never come off! You'll have to have him shot! Serve him right!"

"He w-w-wouldn't allow us to s-s-shoot him," I stuttered.

"Edward, don't!" begged Sophonisba. "What if Edward the Second were to catch it! An' he shan't be shot—dear little fellow!"

Satan came on wagging. He recognised Pansy with delight, and made to greet her with effusion.

She waved him back frantically. So did we.

He came nearer.

“Go away, you vile little wretch, go away! You’re going to be shot!” screamed Pansy, waving him back the more frantically. “Edward, call him off!”

I really did my best.

“Go away and get shot!” went on Pansy, waving harder than ever, “You loathsome little reptile!”

Satan gave a squall of joy at this welcome—for he seemed to read it so—and dashed into Pansy’s lap. He wagged all over her, and rubbed and rolled all over her. The more she screamed, the harder he worked. I do not think the affectionate little fellow had ever enjoyed himself more.

I could not but feel thankful that there was not much left for us. Pansy seemed to have got the entire bone factory if one’s sense of smell was anything to go by.

Then Satan, with a final bark, rushed away from Pansy. So did Sophonisba. So did I.

Pansy screamed and begged us not to leave her.

“I shall die! This will kill me!” she wept, “What’s to be done?”

“You can’t go into the house,” said Sophonisba firmly, “but there’s the tool shed. We can explain to Angus. You must take all your clothes off at once, and have them burned. Angus shall see to it——”

Pansy rose in awful majesty, advancing upon us, and we as quickly retreated before her. “Sophonisba you cannot know what you’re saying!”

Sophonisba grinned, “You took me up wrong, I only meant——”

“I will not have Angus, and I will not go into the tool shed.”

“There’s uncle,” said Sophonisba thoughtfully. “He owes you gratitude. You did his leg for him. You can throw them out for him to burn—the window’s always open.”

“You must be mad! You forget James!”

“I was going to suggest a cloak, only you wouldn’t let me finish. I would leave it there for you. Then you could wrap up in it and slip into the bathroom and have a carbolic bath. It’s all quite simple. I would lend you clothes to get home in.”

“I should miss the train, I ought to be leaving in a few minutes,” cried Pansy turning pale, “And I won’t go into the shed. It’s too great a risk. Somebody might pop in.”

“I don’t think they’d pop in far, or for long,” returned Sophonisba pressing her handkerchief against her nose. “Oh my goodness Edward! I want the brandy.”

I wanted it myself. I was quite beyond speech, conscious only of deadly nausea.

“I can’t go into the shed,” sobbed Pansy.

“You can’t go into the house,” said Sophonisba in fighting tones, and I was thankful to know that only over Sophonisba’s dead body would Pansy spread devastation upon our dainty home.

“I shall go straight home to James—James will understand.”

“How jolly for James,” murmured Sophonisba to me, and aloud to Pansy, “He’d have to be very dense not to understand. *All* London will understand.”

“I will not be parted from him at such a moment! You shall not detain me!” She jumped up from the bench.

"We don't want to," said Sophonisba frankly, "and if you must go—— I'm sure James will be delighted. Most husbands wouldn't let you into the house, but then James is different."

A panic-stricken sort of look flashed into Pansy's fine eyes. "Yes he is different," she said faintly, "quite different."

"But how are you going to get to him?" demanded Sophonisba.

"What are the trains for?" asked Pansy angrily.

"Not for bone-factories. It's against the regulations. It had better be the shed."

"I shall engage a carriage to myself!"

It occurred to me she would hardly require to go to that expense, but I was still incapable of speech.

"I'm sure it's against the regulations," went on Sophonisba, "they mightn't be able to use the train again, and the company can't afford to throw away a whole train on one passenger. It wouldn't pay. Angus will never say a word, not even to Dorothea."

I was not so sure. Angus abominated Pansy.

"Hush! James would never get over it!"

"Will he get over this, Pansy? However, if you have made up your mind to force yourself on the train, there's no more to be said, but you will have to hurry."

"Edward I insist that you come too, and you also Sophonisba! It's the least you can do. It was your dog——"

"Then you mustn't talk about him bein' shot an' such tosh," returned Sophonisba.

"I won't talk about anything, only come, do come! I mayn't be able to manage alone, and—and I do hate being conspicuous."

I hated it too, but I said nothing.

Certainly we were conspicuous. People stared and

then fled hurriedly as they tried to use the same road. Everybody scattered like sheep before us.

Pansy turned sharply upon me. "Why are you walking like that, Edward, as if you were a crab—or a ship tacking?"

Tacking happened to be exactly what I was doing, though I was trying to avoid the wind rather than to catch it. "I was only—only trying not to—not to get to leeward of you, Pansy," I said feebly. How deadly sick I felt!

She pranced on, though without retort—for the first time in her life, I fancy.

The train was signalled, the passengers waiting on the platform, but they waited no longer when we appeared, but fled in complete disorder and locked themselves up in the waiting-rooms. It was a painful position.

"I knew how it would be," said Sophonisba with a snort, "It's not very nice for me an' Edward, known here an' respected as we are."

Pansy had nothing to say even to that.

The station-master bustled up—holding his nose. He said he quite understood all about the accident, and the lady had his sincere sympathy. It was an outrage that the carts were allowed in the roads even at night uncovered, and worse than an outrage that they should be so overloaded as to shed their proceeds for innocent people to fall into. Would we mind leaving, the people wanted the train.

"But I want it too!" wailed Pansy. I think she wanted that train more than she had ever wanted anything in her life before. It had become to her a matter of life and death.

He said he was sorry, but it simply couldn't be done. He would lose his job over it. The regulations were

very strict. The train was just coming. He must ask us to go at once.

"I would go third-class," she implored abjectly.

He said even third-class passengers had their feelings and "queasy innards," and that the company could not afford to lose even a portion of the train.

"But I must go, it's most important. There's—there's serious illness in the family. Oh," she exclaimed, "think of something!"

She is not a liberal woman though she is rich—cause and effect perhaps—but she took out her purse and pressed a five-pound-note into the station-master's hand, and the station-master put it in his pocket and thought of something.

"Very well'm, I'll have a nice clean cattle-truck slung on behind, an' none the wiser, an' put an old bench that was for firewood inside, so as you'll have your private coach, an' be as snug as snug. We'll have it washed out afore the next cattle is due."

We waited for Pansy to decline with outraged horror, and to wither the station-master with a glance.

She thanked him humbly, and crept abjectly, and secretly, into her private coach. Her spirit must indeed have been—temporarily—broken. I could not think that it would do her any permanent harm, or us either. After all she had gone near to breaking mine for more years than I care to remember.

I believe she reached London in due time. We heard that some of the passengers lodged a complaint against the bone-factory, and that it is to be brought up in parliament, but that was all we heard.

"I wonder what James will say and do?" said Sophonisba to me on our return journey.

We never heard. Both maintained an unbroken reticence upon the matter.

“By the bye,” said Sophonisba after a long thoughtful pause, “I have just thought of somethin’ that might have saved Pansy’s feelin’s, she could just have taken off her dress an’ had it burned, and then been able to go into the bathroom and do the rest there, or we could have got Angus to have turned the hose on her as she was. Odd we never thought of it at the time ! ”

I had thought of it. But then I had got my wish, and it is ungracious to fling back the gifts of “the little people.”

Percy met us, sniffing the air. “Hullo, so here you are ! By the bye, old chap, Satan seemed inclined to attach himself to me, so I shut him up in your dressing-room, and hanged if the foxy son of a gun hasn’t gone to earth in your bed ! ”

This sort of thing may be just retribution, but it did not make me any fonder of Percy.

Owing to the condition of my dressing-room, I arrived down to dinner quite unable to touch food.

Sophonisba looked at me in dismay. “Then it is serious ! Oh, Edward, why refuse food, an’ just for a reason like that ! Men of your age don’t go off their grub unless it’s quite fatal. Has it upset you as much as that ? ”

“It has upset me more than words can say,” I returned with a shudder.

Sophonisba banged down her knife and fork and told Jane to take her plate away, that she did not want anything to eat either.

The cool young man seemed unusually concerned. He also gave me his views on the matter, stating that that sort of thing only happened to pedestrians, and that they brought it on themselves. Percy said I had asked for it, and should have been glad to get off so cheaply, that often it meant heavy damages.

I slept in an attic.

CHAPTER XXVII

SOME MORE SURPRISES

AFTER this things began to happen, and so quickly, that I could hardly keep pace with them, and remained in a chronic state of bewilderment.

One day when I was sitting brooding miserably in the library, Sophonisba burst in in a great state of excitement.

“ Oh Edward,” she exclaimed, “ the gardener has called ! ”

“ What gardener ? ” I asked in amazement.

“ The husband of the gardener’s wife, of course. Who ever else ! ”

I was startled, “ What does he want ? ”

“ His wife.”

“ His wife,” I echoed stupidly.

“ You seem to think it extraordinary that a man should want his wife,” said Sophonisba shortly, “ Once you would have thought it extraordinary if he hadn’t. It just shows you——but never mind that. He wants her back, Edward.”

“ I understood that he was content to—to let matters remain as they were ? Why come here and demand her now ? It’s most unreasonable.”

“ Well, he wants to see you about it anyway.”

I got in a fuss, “ I won’t see him ! ” I said angrily,

“ Let him see Percy. This is positively outrageous, Sophonisba.”

“ Uncle is lyin’ down an’ says he can’t see him. Somebody must go. The poor man wants her dreadfully. It is rather pathetic. Edward. Think of it ! They have been parted thirty years ! ”

“ Sometimes it’s more pathetic to think of people that haven’t been parted at all ! ” I growled. “ I call it most unreasonable, most unreasonable indeed. He was happy enough. Why change round like this ? ”

“ That you should become so heartless ! Her father is dyin’, he’s got a cottage and a hundred pounds to leave, an’ the gardener thinks the gardener’s wife ought to be reconciled. The old man may live another two months. The gardener only wants the gardener’s wife’s address. You must go and ask Percy.”

Percy sought me at that very moment. “ Just seen Angus,” he observed, “ marching as to war, all his implements of vengeance well to the fore ! By Jove that’s a poem ! Johnnies get paid for writing things like that in reviews and half-penny papers. Did you hear it ? ”

He repeated it with gusto several times. I could see it was going to rival the lions, and shuddered. Indeed he set it to a sort of chant, and sung it early and late.

“ The gardener’s been,” I said abruptly, “ he wanted to see you. He wants to know where his wife is ? ”

Percy spread out his fat podgy little hands. “ Good Heavens how should I know ! Do they blame me for that ? What about his wife ? ”

“ Surely you remember a certain little incident of the past——”

“ Many, old chap, many ! ”

“ This one was called Sally.”

“ What a name ! ”

“ She was the gardener’s wife, and you ran away with her.”

“ Gay dog I must have been, but I don’t seem to remember one called Sally——”

“ The gardener wants her back.”

“ He must be a rum devil. After thirty years ! ”

“ Then you remember something ? ” I had been sure he was fencing with me.

“ I remember a Clara and a Bella, but I can’t call a Sally to mind. Sorry ! Does it matter, old son ? ”

I was appalled, “ You made a habit of that sort of thing ? ”

“ My dear chap you don’t seem to understand the situation in the least. It isn’t my fault that I represent a great temptation to the ladies—it’s my misfortune. They come to me and said ‘ Fly ! ’ and I fly. A gentleman can do no less. If Sophonisba was not my niece, but only your wife, and she came and flung herself on her knees, and said : ‘ Fly or I die ! ’ well, old man, fly I should, and pretty quickly too ! ”

He laughed as if he could not contain himself, and it seemed to me that my favourite navy suit also found it rather difficult to continue to contain Percy.

“ Talking about lions——” he went on.

I rushed and found Sophonisba, who sent word to the gardener that we had no clue to his wife’s whereabouts. Oddly enough she came home some weeks later, and was in time to be forgiven by her dying father, and to receive his blessing and possessions, and now lives very happily with the gardener in the cottage with the orchard. They are said to be an ideal couple and find it dull to be parted for an hour. They have each the thrilling events of thirty years to talk about

and enlarge upon, and, from all accounts, the gardener's stories are quite as exciting as those of the gardener's wife.

Sophonisba sent the message by Jane, and then turned to me, looking more worried than ever.

"Don't you see a great change in Jane?" she asked. "She's always most respectful in every way, and yet and yet——perhaps it's only the Pimlico publican uncle."

"What about him?" I asked.

"If he's really dyin' an' leaves her the public-house as she hopes, we shall lose Jane. She will be a sort of heiress. Edward, don't you see the difference?"

"There is a difference," I owned, "but I cannot describe exactly in what it lies. She is always most respectful."

"Yes, even when she's come in after wearin' my best hat, an' she knows that I know——but it isn't that. She makes me think of a novelette duchess or something'. As if she was the virtuous persecuted heroine who is goin' to turn out to be somebody else. I don't think in her mind she is our servant at all. Oh dear it's all very tryin'!"

To which I could only agree.

The general election was trying too. We were hustled here, bustled there, and we might have saved ourselves the trouble as things turned out, for Pottle lost his safe seat. His eldest daughter who had come out rather prematurely, had—as prematurely—to go in again, and really one hardly knew whether one stood on one's head or one's heels.

The admiral added to the confusion.

"I knew Hardwick would get in," he said to me.

"What was Hardwick's majority?" I asked.

He sniggered, "Nine unmarried sons," then seeing

356 THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

I did not care for such flippancy, added, "my dear chap, Hardwick hadn't a majority; he had all the voters, every man of 'em, an' he'd have had all the women too if they'd got the votes they are claiming. The suffragette Miss Timons shook hands with him, and took the eldest son back to dinner. You should have come and heard the result for yourself. I have just left the field of battle, and the cries of the wounded and the dying are ringing in my ears still. Pottle has asked for his gun. Oh there's Brown—excuse me, he can't have heard!" And he fled to tell Brown.

At Moss End things drag on their weary way. Now that Mrs. Harrip has gone, there seems nobody at all for me to exchange a word with, always excepting Percy Kearness who exchanges far too many for my liking, and has already got to seventeen lions up a tree, and the same infernal variations on his poetical efforts and tunes. How sick I was of those lions and so on, and how more than sick of Sophonisba's uncle!

As I have said before, it is useless to complain to Sophonisba. She says "if you bring curses home to roost who's to blame when they *do* roost?"

"I am not the man I was," I said, alluding to my nervous state.

"You need not remind me of that, Edward. It is only too obvious. You were quite a nice man once."

I was stung, "Once I found you charming too!" I reminded her.

"Oh don't let's have that sickenin' business all over again," she cried impatiently. "What's the good of it? What's done can't be undone, what's lost can't be regained. We must grin an' bear it, I suppose. As for uncle, time enough to think of gettin' rid of him, when I'm through with this affair of Ernest's. As things are now, I need all my energies for the one

struggle. I only hope they will last out, that's all. I'm gettin' worn to a shadow. Talk about eligibles bein' wary an' aggravatin', Ernest fairly takes the cake, but I'm not goin' to give in till he's dead—or married to somebody else."

"I think you are shameless!" I burst out. "And there are times when I can hardly believe it, when I think it must be a nightmare, and that I shall wake up to find it all a mistake."

"I wouldn't mind doin' some wakin' myself," returned Sophonisba in a very tired cross voice. "Sometimes you are such a stranger Edward, it hardly seems proper to go on livin' with you."

"Perhaps you will not have to put up with my presence in the house much longer," I said very bitterly. "Then, too late, you will see that it might have been worse."

I would run away from Sophonisba, then she could get a divorce on the ground of desertion, which would be disgraceful for me, and not at all for her, and she would be enabled to marry the cool young man and spend a lifetime wishing she hadn't.

What became of me after I had left Sophonisba, Edward the Second, and Billium, Angus' funny stories, and Moss End behind, I neither knew nor cared.

Sophonisba gave a little jump, and turned pale. "So you haven't taken the lesson to heart," she exclaimed. "Not content with bein' saved from an awful scandal by the skin of your teeth, you're goin' to run after it. That honeymoon! Nothin' but horror has come of it, except of course Ernest, an' if I'd guessed the trouble he was goin' to mean, I don't believe I'd have taken it on! Gettin' them up to the scratch is simply the devil, Edward, an' I don't care who says it isn't! I shall have a nervous

breakdown through tryin' to get that man to propose."

"You are still determined to do that?" I asked icily, "Has it never struck you that it might be more decent—if it is not too late to talk of decency—to wait till I am out of the way. Perhaps you will not have to wait as long as you fear. I suppose however my part in the matter is to be entirely ignored?"

Sophonisba set her mouth, "It is, Edward."

"I consider——"

"Hang women with brains! They're always the worst to work it for! An' then you preventin' for all you are worth! But it's no good, I've said it's goin' to be, an' it's just goin' to be—if I burst myself in the effort!"

I walked away in a rage—and into Percy. He sang his tune several times, and then told me about the lions, and took my arm because his feet went better that way. There were ninety lions.

I confounded them in language which at any other time would have shocked myself. Edward the Second overheard, and repeated most of what I had said—the worst part—to Mrs. Kearness on Sunday morning. I received a shocked lecture from Sophonisba, who announced herself far too upset to go to church as she had intended.

A few days later she came running up to me in a great state of excitement, "Oh, Edward, I do believe he's goin' to propose at last. Do stay with me till he comes, an' see!"

It struck me as one of the coolest requests I had ever heard, but Sophonisba had caught some of the cool young man's coolness, and added to it some of her own, so that the sum total was enormous.

"There's nothin' like a witness," she said.

“ You disgust me, Sophonisba.”

“ That’s a nice sort of thing for a husband to say to his wife, even if it’s true,” her voice shook. “ Oh I knew you’d have to come to see it in the end, everybody said you would—— ! Oh why was I born ?—— But this thing must go through, I mustn’t just think of my own troubles. I can go mad or into a decline or somethin’ afterwards. I’m almost worn out. If it doesn’t come off to-day, I believe I shall have to give it up.”

She leaned back in her chair in an exhausted fashion, looking very ill and dispirited. She had sunk into the one the cool young man had occupied under the elm, and motioned me to take Kathleen’s. Kathleen had dragged the cool young man in the woods to save my feelings and appearances. I must say Kathleen took a great deal of trouble over my hated guest, and I felt I owed her a great deal for her heroic efforts. If only they were not doomed to futility ! But the cool young man had tried very hard not to go into the woods with Kathleen, and only her iron will and determinations had taken him there.

“ You will be able to see from there,” said Sophonisba

I sat there relapsed into sullen silence. When the cool young man came to propose to Sophonisba for her second husband, coolly regardless of the fact her first was still alive, I would have the satisfaction of knocking him down—or trying to. He was perhaps a head taller than myself, but weedy. I weighed the most, and surely age and weight and right is bound to tell in the end. Perhaps Sophonisba would not admire him so much when she saw his thin pointed nose swollen, and his narrow eyes black. It would be something to remember when the gate of Moss End clanged to for ever behind me.

“ Why don’t you knock that fly off your nose instead of makin’ all those dreadful faces, Edward ? It makes you look so funny. Shall I knock it off ? ”

“ I can attend to my own fly, thanks ! ” I said, and perhaps my tone was rather caustic.

“ Then do it, an’ don’t snort. Oh dear ! What a dog’s life it is in this world for women ! Where’s Satan—dear little fellow ? ”

I looked at Sophonisba without answering, and I was startled afresh by the change in her. She was ever so much thinner and paler and seemed miserable most of the time. If this was love—why love ? She must want the cool young man very badly. That she would be more miserable with him than without him, I could not but feel certain. Then she would want me back, perhaps write to tell me so, and I wasn’t at all sure that I would come. At least if I did come in the end after she had written quite twice, I would not come in a rush. I wouldn’t try for the first train. I might even keep her waiting a whole day. I wondered how we should be able—for the second time—to unravel that knot called the marriage-law, but that somehow troubled me little. I did not see how any law could make Sophonisba anybody else’s wife, or unmake her mine. I refused to see it.

The cool young man emerged from the woods, and I felt my muscle. He sauntered towards us looking less cool than usual, in fact he was more than a little flushed, and decidedly sheepish. I could see he was put out at finding me with Sophonisba.

“ Er—” he began.

I burst from my chair.

Sophonisba opening weary eyes, seemed without interest. “ Is that you, Ernest ? ”

“ Yes, and—er I’ve—er—done it.”

She seemed puzzled, "What on earth have you done?"

"You can't guess? Come, have a shot!"

She shook her head, "I'm afraid you will have to tell me yourself."

He opened his mouth to tell her, and I turned ready to dash the fatal words from his lips. He should not propose to my wife.

"I'm engaged to Kathleen," he announced.

All my breath left me suddenly, and I caught wildly at the back of my chair.

"What!" exclaimed Sophonisba staring at him in amazement, as well she might, "What did you say?"

"Kathleen is goin' to marry me," he said.

"You—you scoundrel!" I got out, and made for him. Sophonisba caught me by the coat and held me. "Edward are you quite mad!" she gasped.

I think I was. The idea that all the time the cool young man had been playing fast and loose with Sophonisba, was more than I could stand. His intentions had never been serious! He had not meant to wait for her! He had broken her heart!

"You—" I began again.

Sophonisba gripped my arm, "Don't be silly, Edward!" she cried, and turning to the cool young man, said:

"It's only his fun."

"Is it?" growled the cool young man looking rather queer. "What's Kathleen to him I'd like to know?"

"It's a great surprise, Ernest," went on Sophonisba. "I never thought of such a thing somehow, one doesn't, but it's a very nice surprise. I am really quite glad about it."

"I consider—" I burst out.

The cool young man turned on me with rather an

offensive stare. "Thought you were occupied elsewhere, an' even if she's gone, you can't have 'em all, certainly, not Kath. I thought that was all over. I never thought you would still object."

"He doesn't," said Sophonisba quickly, "it's all a mistake, an' his idea of bein' funny. He's been simply frightfully funny lately. Of course he is really pleased and just as surprised as I am, aren't you Edward?" She poked me in the back.

"Oh, is he?" exclaimed the cool young man with an incredulous laugh. "Seems to me he might chuck up bein' 'funny' at his time of life!" He laughed shortly, glaring at me in a jealous fashion.

"I consider it little short of an outrage!" I exploded. "And I must ask you to explain the meaning of your extraordinary statement!"

"Of course it's extraordinary," got out Sophonisba, "How sly you have been, you bad boy! I always thought it was goin' to be Mr. Turner. Too bad of you to have rushed the citadel like this. I wonder what the poor pater will say."

"Well, I went to church twice when he was preachin'," returned the cool young man, "an' stuck it out to the bitter end."

"Kathleen will be a great loss to them, but of course if it's for her happiness——"

"There are two others left," he interposed hastily, "'Course Kath will see to all that, dress 'em up, an' tool 'em about—what! Well, we may as well have the banns up an' get through with the biz. After all a fellow can only be hanged once!" He laughed long and loudly.

"You are a regular young Lochinvar," murmured Sophonisba, "but of course it's not my business, and I knew what a strong will you have. If you say it's

to be at once, well you won't be deterred by a woman's scruples, and at once it will be. Here's Kathleen."

She went to meet her, and I heard her murmur "At last!" and Kathleen reply, "Thank goodness!"

Then the cool young man and his fiancée wandered away arm-in-arm, looking very pleased with themselves, and Sophonisba and I were left to ourselves and to explanations.

A sudden hush, a hush of peace, seemed to descend upon Moss End. In the distance Angus, who, at sight of the cool young man and Kathleen arm-in-arm, had thrown up his spade, catching it cleverly again, was whistling, "Pop goes the Weasel!" with great gusto. He was glad, I think, to know I was to be spared the worst.

I was glad too—till I thought of Sophonisba, and remembered that my gain was her loss.

"He has very strange taste," I said at length. "I cannot but wonder at it."

"But she doesn't look her age, an' we've taken off ten years, an' the poor pater must just 'cook' the marriage-certificate or I'll know the reason why, an' she's hidden her brains an' perhaps can keep them hidden always, you never know. She's good enough for him, an' he's good enough for her, quite decent—for a millionaire. Of course if he had no money he'd be a regular outsider, but he has the money, an' that's what Kathleen wants most. She'll settle the others too, I made her swear never to rest by day, or sleep by night, till that was done, if I got him for her, for I couldn't go through it again, Edward, I believe it would kill me."

"What are you saying Sophonisba?" I cried huskily. Could I believe the evidence of my ears?

"I could be happy again if it wasn't that everythin'

had changed," she went on, "an' uncle still here——an' you an' me so far apart——" her voice broke.

I took her hand, "You will get over it," I said. "He isn't worth fretting for. A man that could be content with the second-best. How could he prefer Kathleen to you?"

She jerked her hand away. "Oh, Edward, you must be mad! That woman has made you so. You've been a different person ever since you fell in love with Mrs. Harrip——"

"Me in love with Mrs. Harrip!" I echoed gasping, "You are joking of course—but it's not a very nice joke. Why it was you being in love with the cool young man——"

"Me in love with the cool young man!" screamed Sophonisba. "Me in love with that fatuous aggravatin', idiotic bounder! Whatever are you sayin'—that's not a nice joke either! Why from the moment I meet him I endured him, just because I was tryin' all I was worth to catch him for Kathleen, who would have been married ages ago if she hadn't had any brains——"

A blazing light burst upon me. I began to see much. I realised that I might have been a little blind. I caught both her hands, "Oh Sophonisba," I got out, "I thought you wanted him for—for yourself, for your second husband——"

"Don't talk to me of second husbands—the beasts!" exclaimed Sophonisba violently, "If anythin' happened to you I should die, so there, an' if I didn't die, I'd drown myself in the lake—if there'd been enough rain to fill it. Oh, Edward, how could you have been so dense! You thinkin' it was me, an' me thinkin' it was you, an' it bein' neither of us!" She laughed brokenly.

“I—” I began.

“I—” she began at the same moment.

And then we explained at length, and were still explaining and wildly happy, when Angus came up, shook us in silence by the hand, and ere departing observed, “The old pig-stye is fair eatin’ off it’s head for want of use ? ”

We let it eat off it’s head no longer. “So, Sophonisba, we have got our Eden back again,” I observed looking round the familiar scene. And then, unconsciously, I sighed. We had our Eden, it was true, but it was an Eden occupied by the snake, and he took up by far the larger share of it.

Sophonisba echoed my sigh, her head against my shoulder, “Snakes get scotched sooner or later,” she said, “an’ perhaps somethin’ like that may happen to uncle.”

“Who’s taking my name in vain ? ” asked a hated voice, and Percy burst hilariously upon us, wearing my Donegal Norfolk, quite one of my most becoming suits. I cannot say it has that effect on him. I turned away my eyes in disgust.

“Old chap, the gong has gone twice for luncheon, and if there’s one thing that puts poor Percy out, it is to be kept waiting for his meals. Come along ! What d’yer want to sit in a place like this for ? Ain’t it rather lonely ? ”

We followed in silence, inwardly boiling.

“Where are the other pair of idiots ? ” he asked as he took his place. “So Kathleen’s hooked her fish at last. Took a mighty lot of playing.”

“I must ask you not to speak in that disgusting fashion ! ” I said sharply.

“It’s not so far out though,” said Sophonisba. “However, I suppose we must have struck the right

fly in the end, for he's landed all right, an'—oh here they are ! ”

She beamed in a maternal way at the lovers. I think the cool young man, or rather Ernest, was quite astonished at the enthusiasm with which I greeted him, for his pleasant handsome face flushed a little, and he drew up his stalwart frame to its goodly inches. I told him I had quite misunderstood the situation—though not how I had misunderstood it—and I hoped he would allow me to welcome him into the family, and to wish him every happiness.

“ If you have but half of my luck you'll have nothing to complain of,” I added.

“ Oh I think while I am at it, I might take a slice more than that,” he returned. “ But it's very good of you all the same. I'm sure I don't bear any ill-will, though I don't deny that when you seemed so against it, I got more determined than ever, and perhaps rushed the affair a bit.”

We drank the health of the affianced, Percy very frequently indeed, then I drank Sophonisba's health, though she begged me for goodness sake not to make her look so peculiar, and people honoured that too.

Luncheon over, Ernest and Kathleen vanished, and Sophonisba and I made to vanish too. Just as we had got half-way down the drive however, Percy caught us up and clung to us more in need than in affection, “ Just remembered an adventuresh of mine,” he began, “ a very odd adventuresh. There were a hundred lions all at oncesh up a treesh——”

It took violence to shake him off, but I shook him off in the end, and he went to lie down.

“ He's the fly in the ointment an' we simply must do somethin',” wailed Sophonisba, “ or there won't be any ointment by the time he's finished.”

“ Yes, most certainly we must think of something,” I agreed, “ It is simply not to be endured.”

But we spent two hours thinking hard, and they were barren hours. The solution seemed beyond us, his ingenuity greater than ours.

“ Lets go down the road,” she said at length, “ we might meet the telescopin’ admiral.”

I looked at her in some surprise. It is usually her endeavour—as it is mine—to avoid meeting this gentleman.

“ He’s as good as the *Mornin’ Post*,” she went on, “ an’ we can’t get it in there till to-morrow. I shall tell him the weddin’ is goin’ to be at once, that Ernest won’t wait.”

We had not gone far before we perceived the admiral close in conversation with our late member, advancing upon us. They were arguing hotly about the second hole Pottle had said he’d done in one, and that the admiral swore he hadn’t, or he would have noticed it himself.

“ I wonder that Mr. Pottle likes to be seen about the roads after his disgrace,” said Sophonisba, “ I should think the present Mrs. Pottle must always be wishin’ she wasn’t.”

Sophonisba bowed to Pottle, and shook hands with the admiral, “ I suppose you’ve heard the surprise my sister and Ernest Bung have sprung on us ? ” she asked. “ Isn’t it too bad of them ? ”

“ My logical deduction told me all about it at eleven-forty this morning,” he returned, “ And I congratulate you very heartily, Mrs. Delland. If ever a woman deserved her good fortunes, you do. There are two theories that observation proves right over and over again. One is that intelligence is the salt of life, the other, that mind is superior to matter.”

Sophonisba laughed, "Well you seem to have found out our little secret very cleverly, but of course I know we can rely on you to keep it. You see Ernest is rather ridiculous, and talks of bein' married at once, and the less people know, the better."

The admiral said he quite understood, and to trust him.

A few hours later, everybody within a radius of fifty miles knew of the new engagement, and of it's probable culmination in a very speedy marriage.

CHAPTER XXVIII (AND LAST)

ONCE MORE WE RELY UPON ANGUS

IF it had not been for Sophonisba's uncle, everything would have been perfect, but he saw to it that everything was very much otherwise.

He looked upon our home and our possessions, especially mine, as his.

I did my best. I said we wanted our house to ourselves, and I insisted upon his going then and there.

He would roar with laughter, and say I was "a witty devil" ere departing to his own room to lie down, or else he would endeavour to be pathetic, and succeed in being aggravating. He would talk about dying in a ditch at our doors. Indeed he went so far as to select the exact spot in the ditch outside Moss End. It was where the four roads met and everybody passes up and down. He was quite capable of taking up his position there, and we knew it. The thing was to get him out of Hill Land altogether, but it was so much easier said than done.

"You must take Angus' guarantee away," said Sophonisba, "There's nothin' else for it."

I shook my head. "A man's word is his honour. I am responsible for the promise, and I must keep it."

"Of course one is usually responsible," agreed Sophonisba, "unless of course one happened to be under the influence of drink at the time? Wasn't that the day you had three glasses of nettle-beer?"

370 THE BEWILDERED BENEDICT

“ I’m afraid I was sober enough to know what I was doing,” I said regretfully. If, for once in my life, I might have been “ as drunk as a lord ! ” What a way out of the difficulty !

“ Then that’s no go,” she sighed, “ Suppose you borrowed Mr. Pottle’s gun, an’ got drunk an’ shot him by accident—uncle, I mean. You’re on the bench. Angus could swear that Mr. Pottle had done it ; he wouldn’t mind at all—Angus I mean. Nobody believes in him any longer—a man that says he’s against ‘ Votes for Women ’ an’ then goes an’ has a baby-suffragette ! ”

It seemed to me that would be too hard on poor Pottle, who almost seemed to have been punished enough for his misdeeds, and I hastily declined to take part in the plan. “ I might not be able to get drunk enough, Sophonisba,” I lamented, “ or I might get too drunk and make a real mistake, and shoot you or Angus.”

Sophonisba agreed that perhaps it might be rather a risk, and proceeded to rack her brains again.

“ I’ve got it ! ” she exclaimed, “ He’s always borrowin’ money from you to go on the splurge in Hill Town, an’ then comin’ back awfully squiffy without any cash. What he’d love would be a proper big splurge in London, an’ he shall have it—poor dear ! After all, an uncle is an uncle ! We mustn’t be hard, Edward.”

“ Certainly not. Your idea—— ? ”

“ You take him up an’ lose him in London ! ” she exclaimed excitedly, “ ‘ Tragedy in High Life—and Hill Land ! ’ ‘ An uncle lost, stolen or strayed ! ’ ‘ No reward for its return ! ’ Oh Edward, isn’t it quite too lovely ? Why didn’t we think of it before ? ”

“He isn’t lost yet,” I said rather doubtfully, “and I don’t quite see——”

“No darlin’, but I do. You have business at your lawyers. Would he like to come up for the day? At your expense of course. Would a loan of five pounds be any use to him? You would get the tickets. He jumps at it. You land in London, havin’ taken one double an’ one single ticket, him bein’ no wiser, seein’ he’s bound to make tracks for the refreshment-room the minute you land on the station. You part, not in silence an’ tears, though. You say you’re returnin’ by the train that gets in here about midnight, an’ ask him to be sure not to miss it. He goes off on his spree, an’ spends every cent. The minute he’s off you scoot back to the station, an’ come home by the train that leaves half-an-hour later. We’re here. He’s in London, an’ without a ticket to get back. He comes for the midnight train an’ looks for you. You aren’t there. He hasn’t any money, an’ he sees he’s lost the game. He goes back to his low companions or a pub, an’ lives on somebody else, or gets run in for thievin’, an’ we never see or hear of him any more. He won’t starve, we know that. Could anything be more simple?”

And really it did not seem as if it could.

We carried out the plan with perfect ease. I left Percy adrift in London, and came home to Sophonisba. The garden had never looked so lovely, the very air tasted sweeter.

“We shall sleep in peace to-night,” said Sophonisba beaming.

To be on the safe side I told Angus all, and gave him strict directions. “I do not expect anybody from the midnight train,” I said, “but I want you to do sentry-go all night between the two gates, and prevent anybody

getting in. You are at liberty to use what means you please. You must not touch a visitor within our gates, but I have no responsibility towards a midnight intruder. He might be a burglar, Angus, and Mrs. Delland has rather a nervous fear of burglars."

"The missus can sleep in peace," said Angus with a chuckle, "there won't be no burglars get inside the gates this night." He took up his position with hoe and spade, the three-pronged fork stuck into the ground by his side.

And Sophonisba and I went early to bed, and slept the sleep of the just.

We were in better time than usual for breakfast next morning. We did not want to lose any of the day that was our own at last.

Percy was in his place with my paper. He said it was a lovely day, and we were too taken aback to do more than agree. He made no mention of the previous day's expedition, and somehow we found ourselves unable to mention it either.

To tell the truth I was considerably unnerved. There seemed to me something positively uncanny here. I learned what I could, but it was not much. He had arrived on the London platform without money or ticket, and waiting till the train was just moving off, made a rush for the guard's van, and just caught it, explaining to the guard that he was a belated passenger, and at once plunging into a recital of all his adventures. Before they had gone far—and the train did not stop till it got to the junction where tickets were taken—the guard was his fast friend, and highly honoured by his company. At the junction no one thought of looking into the guard's van to demand a ticket of anyone they found there, and his arrival at Hill Land was quite unquestioned.

Angus swore he had not been near the gates, and Sophonisba said he must have crawled through a gap in the hedge lower down, and that she had measured it, and found it just possible.

“ But the house, Sophonisba ? ” I cried. “ Every place bolted and barred, for I saw to that myself ? ”

“ Jane,” she said at once.

“ Surely not ! Why ? ”

“ Because, though she’s never been more respectful, she is even less our servant than ever in her mind, and absolutely the novelette heroine. What would the virtuous heroine do ? Let in the poor persecuted hero. You can bet your bottom dollar on that, Edward ! ”

I daresay Sophonisba was right, but it did not make it any the easier for us. There were two against us, it seems, and I even suggested getting rid of the perfect waitress, but Sophonisba would not hear of it. She said we could never hope to get another like her, that Jane was the perfect parlourmaid, and that once uncle had gone for good, and the Pimlico publican uncle had died without leaving her anything, or got better, she would come to her senses and out of the novelette, and just be Jane again.

“ Anyway we’ve jolly well got to risk it, Edward ! ” she added, and there was no more to be said.

So time went on, and Percy was still with us, really more with us then ever, and certainly more of a pest. Daily he grew more exacting, and was continually asking when I was going to take him up to London again for another “ beano.”

Then the boys were always with him, and imitating just those things they shouldn’t. The climax came when Edward the Second announced a craving for strong drink, and his rooted determination to be always drunk when he grew up.

Percy was rather hilarious in his cups.

“It’s f-f-fun to be d-d-drunk,” said Edward the Second, “it makes you f-f-fat an’ j-j-jolly.”

Sophonisba clung tragically to my arm. “It’s almost worse than curates,” she wailed. “But somethin’s got to be done to choke the boy off.” She thought hard for some moments, then she turned with a beguiling smile to my first-born.

“Why wait till you’re grown-up,” she said to my amazement, “Wouldn’t you like to be drunk and jolly now ? ”

And Edward the Second—startled and defiant—said he would.

“Then come along,” said Sophonisba beaming, “I expect you’d like best to be drunk on beer. I will fetch it you.”

Edward the Second turned rather pale, but he said beer was what he meant.

I followed Sophonisba, and found her very busy drawing a large tankard of beer. “Are you—are you hoping it will make him ill ? ” I asked nervously.

“I’m makin’ sure that it will make him ill,” said Sophonisba grimly, and shook a packet of white powder in it.

“What’s that ? ” I exclaimed.

“If you must know, Edward, it’s an emetic. He will be very seedy, an’ very sick of beer, an’ none the worse in any way for a moral lesson.”

“I—I think I’ll go out for a walk if you don’t mind, Sophonisba,” I stammered.

“Oh all right, but come with me first. He may object to drink it after all.”

I must say I hoped he would.

He certainly opened his eyes at the size of the tankard, “All that ? ” he said, and seemed a little nervous.

“ It takes all that to do it properly,” said Sophonisba briskly. “ You can’t be funny, not really funny an’ jolly on less. Now drink it up.”

She stood over him till he had done so, though he complained the taste was not as much to his liking as he had expected, and after he had finished, burst into tears, and said he did not feel at all like being funny.

“ You mustn’t be too impatient,” said Sophonisba. “ Just you wait ! ”

She caught me up as I got to the door. “ There isn’t all that frantic hurry, Edward ! Don’t be silly, darlin’ ! Don’t go rushin’ down the road without a hat, an’ in carpet slippers, or people will think somethin’s happenin’.”

I got away just the same, and Mrs. Kearness met me, dragged it all out of me, and said it was the most disgraceful and brutal thing she had ever heard of, and that I ought to be ashamed of myself, and Sophonisba too, and I said I was, and after due time returned home.

When I returned, Sophonisba said I need not have gone off for the day, and took me to see Edward the Second who was in bed, very white and limp, but well on the road to recovery. He was not very talkative, merely remarking he had never got to the funny stage, and that he should never drink anything but water.

I should have thought Sophonisba would have been pleased enough at that, but she wakes me up at night to enquire in a panic-stricken voice, “ Oh Edward, if he grows up a teetotaler ! What then ! ”

The episode was of much interest to Angus.

“ There’s wimmin fitted to be mothers of boys, an’ wimmin as isn’t,” he said, “ and the main of ’em isn’t, an’ it’s them as mainly has ’em ! My own mother she

were like Miss Soapy, just cut out for it, she were, an' six she had no less, Monday's, an' Tuesday's, and every day of the week but the holy Sabbath, which nothing would ever persuade her to break. She said if we hadn't earned a thrashing that day, we'd earn it afore the week was out, and she liked to do everything in order. So she had her time set out for each of us each day, save Sunday, she doing no labour on the Sabbath. Owing to the grace of God, my day was Monday, washing-day, when her arm was fair-tired. I must say I fair saw to it, an' my brothers too, that we earned our night's leathering afore the week was out, so that all worked out proper-like, and to the glory of God."

"Quite so," I agreed absently, and sighed.

He studied my face, and spat into a flower-bed. "You couldn't remove that there guarantee?" He swung the hoe round till a strong current of air almost whirled me off my feet.

I shook my head.

"Ain't there some new religion you could join, sir, what makes things all upside-down like, guarantees being taken contrary, according to the law?"

I said I had never heard of any religion quite like that.

He scratched his head, "Then it's got to be thinking instead of hoeing, sir, that's all." And he stood for a long while in deep thought, his face screwed up in a very odd manner.

"I've thought of a way," he said at length.

"I'll take it," I said without any doubt whatsoever. "I'm desperate, Angus."

He said it was enough to make anyone so, and added reluctantly, "But it's a terrible extravagant way, and it do fair go against the grain."

"Never mind that," I said, "it's bound to be worth it. What is it?"

“Just putting temptation in his way, sir.”

I was startled, for I could not but remember the gardener's wife. “What sort of temptation?” I asked quickly.

Angus sighed, “Money, sir,” he said. “Keep him short for a few weeks, sir, don't lend him a cent.” I wondered how he guessed I had lent Percy money, “Then sir, when he's fair desperate-like for it, the temptation will be there all handy. But I fears it'll take all of fifty pound sir, to do it.”

“But if he took it, he would return after it was spent.”

“Not if he knew as you knew and could prove he took it, and there was a warrant out agin him, sir. Onst there's a warrant out, or he thinks there is, he won't show his face here in a hurry. You get the money from the bank, in gold, sir, so as he knows you can't stop it, and sees to it he knows it's in your drawer and that you can prove he's the only one what does know. And you'll have to have out the warrant, sir.”

I did not mind the idea of the money, it seemed to me very cheap at the price, but I hardly cared for the idea of the warrant, however Angus made me promise, and I promised.

Sophonisba said it was a splendid idea, and demanded that the warrant be made out at once.

I explained that the law stated that the crime had to be committed before the warrant was drawn out.

“How silly!” exclaimed Sophonisba exasperated, “Then what did you go on the bench for if you can't make the law useful?”

“There will be a scandal,” I groaned.

“One more or less——what's the odds?” she asked recklessly, “An' there needn't be. He may see he's got to the end of his tether at last, an' stop away, then nobody need know. When he's swallowed up in

obscurity, or put away in prison, he won't matter bein' a relation the same. Lots of people's relations ought to be in prison an' they know it. I shan't mind if you don't, an' it mayn't leak out anyhow."

Anyway we saw we must risk it and hope for the best, and the train was laid.

Just when Percy was bored to death for want of ready money, he discovered I had left fifty pounds in gold in my private drawer and that nobody save Sophonisba and I and Angus (Angus said we had better have three witnesses) knew it was there, or knew he knew it was there.

Sophonisba and I shut up extra early that night, and slept calmly and late. We did not think we should find Percy at the breakfast-table when we came down, and our anticipations were not disappointed.

There was no sign of Percy—or of Jane.

"He had to have the two temptations, I suppose," said Sophonisba, for the money had gone. "Just like a man! The best parlourmaid we ever had! What does uncle care about the servant-problem! Oh Edward run and see if he's taken that awful bag?"

"Well?" she asked on my hurried return.

"He seems to have taken quite a number of bags—and—er—things," I said shortly. He had however left me the clothes I stood up in, my silver, though not my gold watch, and one must be thankful for small mercies. Sophonisba and I were very thankful for them.

"What's to happen next?" asked Sophonisba. "The gardener's wife came back to the gardener and her father, but Jane hasn't a husband to come back to, or a father. There's only the Browns' butler whom she used to walk-out with—and he sings in the choir. So she won't have anybody at all to come back to.

Do you think there's any hope she may return to us after a bit an' say nothin' about it, an' go on waitin', an' bein' as respectful as before ? ”

I said I doubted it.

Sophonisba sighed, “ Well there's bound to be somethin' disappointin'—if only it had been Gertrude, we'll have to give her notice anyhow, an' it would have saved that ! Anyway what's the good of worryin', he's gone, an' gone for good ! ”

It certainly seemed as if he had. Even Percy Kearness could hardly return to Hill Land after twice leaving it under such conspicuous circumstances, to say nothing of the warrant in my drawer.

Then Sophonisba began to want to know how it had happened, and what was going to happen, and said she simply could not rest till she knew, adding, “ An' after all he is my uncle ! ”

“ But how are we to find out ? ” I asked helplessly.

“ The telescopin' admiral,” she said at once. “ Run an' fetch him, Edward ! ”

So I ran and fetched him, and he was able to supply some information.

It seemed that late last night a cab had drawn up before our gates, and that a tall elegant woman, and a short fat little man, had made fifteen journeys into it, carrying bags and parcels. Then they had caught the midnight train to London, travelling first class.

The admiral ended by thanking me for the great service I had rendered him in opening his eyes to the obsolete pattern he had endured so long, and said he would always consider himself under a special obligation in consequence.

“ I couldn't have seen half at the old range,” he added.

He went away to keep our secret, and Sophonisba

paced restlessly up and down. "But I want to know what happened after they got to London," she cried, "Where they are goin' to live, an' how, an' oh ! simply everythin', Edward ! I must know or burst. I've half a mind to wire to Pansy !"

We made it a whole mind between us, and the telegram was sent. A reply came at once signed Pansy, and commanding us to leave it all to her, "*All* elopers get tracked in the end," she added.

So we left it to Pansy.

We had to wait some time before Sophonisba's curiosity could be fully satisfied. When we got Pansy's wire we met her at the station, and walked arm in arm with her up to the house.

Her first words were not what we expected :

"Oh Edward how dreadful for you having a relation running a public house. *All* publics are so public !"

"By Jove ! Is he ?" I exclaimed. "How awfully suitable !" It did indeed seem to me that Percy had chanced upon a career of which he could make a success. I could imagine him filling the bar morning, noon and night with men thirsty for tales of adventure, and retaining them till their wives took them home.

"But Jane ?" gasped Sophonisba, "Such an ideal parlourmaid ! So respectful ! Is there any chance of us gettin' her back, Pansy ? Don't tell me you've snapped her up !"

Pansy made a sort of whistling sound through her teeth, and words seemed almost to fail her.

"That woman !" she got out at last, "Oh the poor man—it was too pitiful !" She blew her nose emotionally.

"Good gracious !" I gasped, "What did she do ?"

"Edward, the moment they got to London, she

deserted him ! She talked about her reputation—the airs and graces of the creature !—and leaving her unhappy victim alone in London—to perish for all she knew, or seemed to care—she went to stay with a married cousin, and when he came to call next morning, the husband had to be present ! What do you think of that ? Did you ever hear such audacity in your life, and that's not half—I only hope I'll be able to find words to tell you the rest——”

“ I'm sure you will, Pansy,” I said soothingly, as she paused in dismay, “ you always do, you know.”

“ Then she had the banns put up,” went on Pansy gasping. “ What are the lower orders coming to ! ”

“ But did he stay for them ? ” enquired Sophonisba.

“ She made him stay, he was a mere helpless spider in her web. Her uncle had died, and she took the poor man—I mean your uncle, Sophonisba, not hers—into the public house for a honeymoon, and so as not to give the license time to expire. And she makes him work. She, the servant, makes the master work. What do you say to that, Edward ? ”

“ That I'm infernally glad of it ! ” I said.

“ You have no heart, no feeling, the man's life in ruins, and you can talk about being glad ! *All* men are brutes. I went down to see the unhappy victim, to do what I could. Did I see him ? No, or at least nothing to speak of. Did she call me, ‘ ma'm ? ’ No she didn't, she called me ‘ Pansy,’ and said she was very pleased to welcome her first caller, and her new relation. She said she had never been one, like many she could name, who seemed to regard her relations more like cursings than blessings. She said she hoped ‘ James ’ was well, and that I had good news of ‘ dear Edward ’ and ‘ Soapy ! ’ ”

I dropped Pansy's arm and went round to Sophonisba. I leaned helplessly up against her, and she leaned helplessly up against me.

"I was struck dumb—dumb Edward!" said Pansy in an anguished voice.

I said I could hardly believe it—as well as I could say anything. Sophonisba was long past any conversational effort.

"While I was dumb, she said she insisted that I should come into the drawing-room and have tea. So I went into the drawing-room and had tea—a most artistic and refined drawing-room, and perfect tea, the cheek of the creature was beyond words! One of the smartest servants I had ever seen attended on us, and was even more respectful to Jane than Jane had once been to us. When she had gone, Jane, who had told me to be sure and call her by her Christian name now we were 'close relations,' said that she did hope she was not going to find her life complicated by the servant problem. Then she rang the bell and told the girl to bid her master wait on her mistress."

Sophonisba giggled hysterically.

"You can't imagine my feelings. I kept being struck dumb all the time. Your unhappy uncle came up, Sophonisba, he looked thinner and very subdued, and he treated Jane as if she was an employer, and he was a workman, and might get the sack any minute if he wasn't careful. She gave him two cups of tea and told him to drink it, and he drank it. Then she sent him down and told him to wipe all the glasses, and see he wiped them better than he had done last time, and, very meekly, he said he would. It was one of the saddest sights I had ever seen. I went downstairs for a bit to help him, and a little later I came away."

"Before closing time, I hope?" asked Sophonisba

gravely. "Are you sure James would like you waiting till the policeman came?"

Pansy got red and angry. "Don't be absurd Sophonisba, of course I went early, as soon as ever I had said a few consoling words to the broken-hearted man."

"I hope you had your latchkey?"

"He—oh it's pitiful—pitiful!"

"I hope you took something for the good of the house, Pansy?" I could not help saying.

"How like a man! *All* men think of that first!"

"But did you?" persisted Sophonisba.

"I took a bottle of brandy back as a present to James," said Pansy shortly.

"The best brandy?" asked Sophonisba. "James is so particular. Or just the best price? Uncle sold it you of course?"

"It will come in for cooking," said Pansy briefly. "James likes his things full-flavoured."

"He'll probably get them full-flavoured," remarked Sophonisba to me.

"I think you might show a little more feeling. Your loss is that creature's gain, and think what a use she is putting him to! They have put up a new sign, 'The Woolly West,' and people come in crowds, and stay till they can't. His culture and conversation is proving most elevating, and doing a lot of good in his profession. Two horrible low public-houses near have had to close up. But all the careless gaiety, all the high spirits of youth, gone! His whisky is dealt out to him by that person, and if she doesn't think he's earned it, he doesn't get it, and the poor crushed thing has come down to earning it, Edward!"

"It is indeed a come-down!" I agreed gravely.

Sophonisba clung to me harder, and Pansy turned on her with disgust. "Don't paw Edward before me, if

you please, Sophonisba. He won't run away. He's nobody to run away to," she gave me a sympathetic glance, and added, "*All* men should have somebody to run away to, except James of course—James is different."

I happened to know how "different" he was, and was careful to say nothing.

"You mean the grass-widow?" said Sophonisba laughing, "but he's confessed all his little affairs, and I've confessed all mine, and I guess it's about even!" She laughed joyously.

Pansy stared at Sophonisba, and then turned to me, "Sophonisba could never have anything to confess—poor girl," she said impatiently, "But what's this about you, Edward? Did you really confess? How much? *All* men keep something back—except James, but then James is different."

How this illusion was cherished of Pansy! Sophonisba and I caught each other's eyes, and then looked away again. We happened to know something of the things James kept back—wisely, I shouldn't wonder.

"Oh James is a paragon," Sophonisba answered easily, "and poor dear Edward isn't—thank goodness! He's just flesh and blood."

"Much too much flesh and blood," snapped Pansy, "*All* marriages make people too fat or too thin."

"We laugh too much," gurgled Sophonisba, "an' as we'd rather not give up laughin' we're not likely to give up bein' fat—not that Edward is fat, he's just right."

"And so is Sophonisba," I stated emphatically.

"What do you laugh at?" demanded Pansy suspiciously.

"At other people, an' relations an' things, an

sometimes at ourselves," answered Sophonisba, "An' there's nothin' like it. You should just try it, Pansy. We wake up laughin', an' go to sleep laughin', an' will die laughin', I shouldn't wonder!"

Indeed Sophonisba scarcely exaggerated. Our hearts are ridiculously light. Everything makes us laugh.

The other day she came in laughing more than usual. She announced that the artistic house had fallen down in the night,—as she had always declared it would,—and that young Mr. Brown had departed hurriedly for the colonies, the admiral had seen him go, and it looked like a hurried flight.

"Yes, to the colonies," giggled Sophonisba, "To build for the future generation!"

She laughed when Angus said,—apropos of Pansy's news,—"Well, Miss Soapy, if Jane ain't the first seemingly as he's runned off with, she's the first what's married him, and all I can say is, *Serve him right!*"

And most of all she laughed, when,—about a year later,—rather an odd letter, containing odd news, came to us from Pansy.

"What do you think that woman has had the cheek to do?" (it began), "The airs and graces of the creature! Have a baby. Isn't it awful for that poor man, and so brave about it? He just said it didn't matter, and tried to appear proud and pleased and perfectly happy with his new lot. *All* first babies are Events and Miracles, but I must own this is rather a beautiful child. They have decided to call her Pansy Hermione, the poor father pointed out a quite extraordinary resemblance to me, and asked me so piteously to be god-mother, that I hadn't the heart to refuse, and I had that lovely old Christening robe as good as new. To think he should have come down to this!

All fine china gets broken in the end among the earthen pots."

Sophonisba pointed out that I had missed the postscript.

"A woman's postscript is all that you need read of a letter," she said grinning at me. "It contains the crux of the matter."

"What is the postscript?" I asked curiously.

Sophonisba read it, as well as she could for laughing. "P.S." she began, "By the bye do you want any cooking brandy for Christmas? I have several bottles I could let you have cheap?"

Then she leaned against me with a happy sigh, "So we can write 'Finis to an uncle,'" she exclaimed, "Edward, I love you more frightfully than ever—please get me some more bacon. It's by the fire keepin' hot. No it isn't Goodness, Satan has got it—dear little fellow!"

THE END.

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